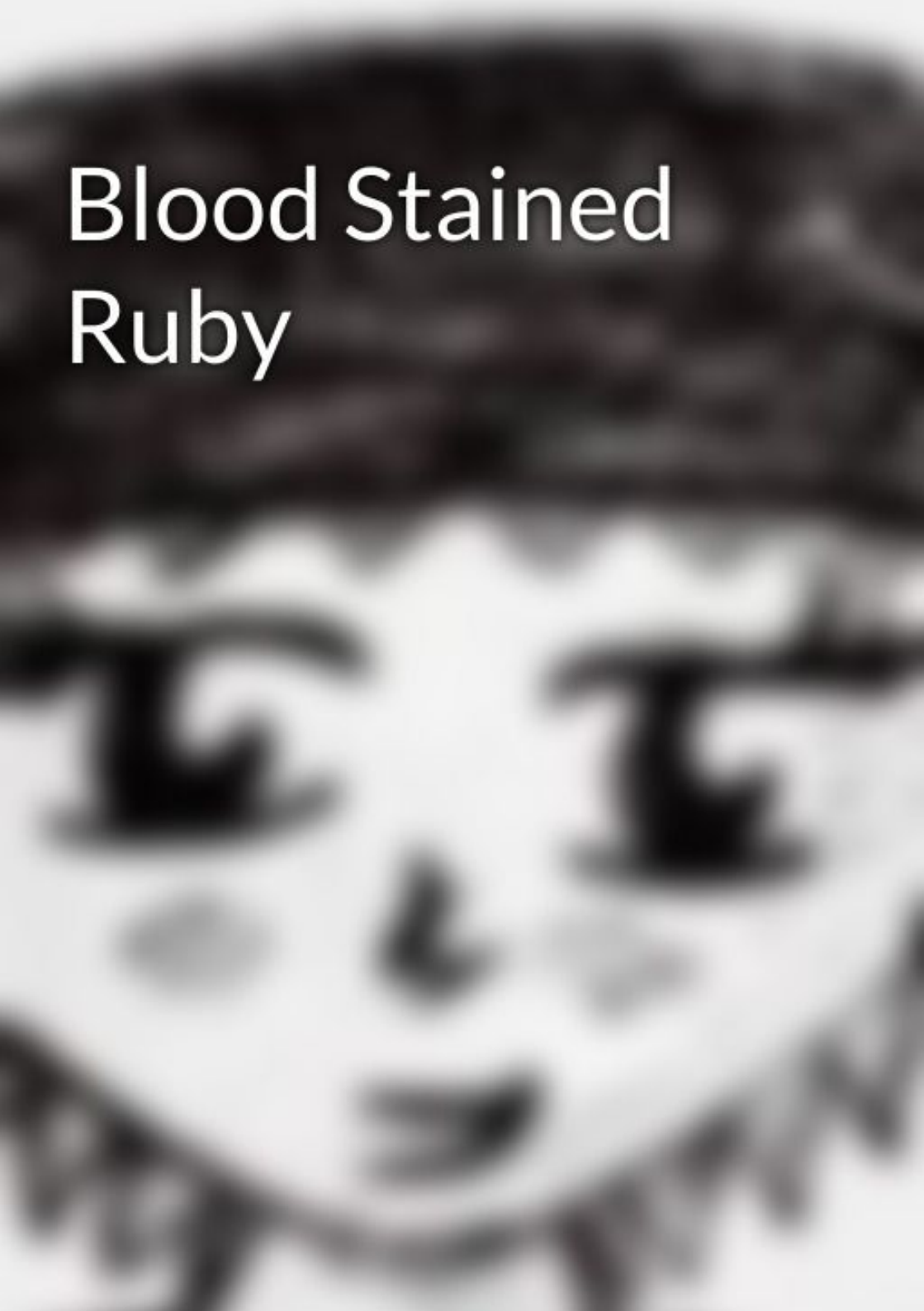
Blood Stained Ruby



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Blood Stained Ruby

By JazziJ

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Chapter 1

Blood Stained Ruby Part 1

Prologue

I knew it should be painful. The worst part was, I didn't want him to stop. My warm blood began to trickle down my neck. This was comforting. After going so long without it, his lips against my skin felt like heaven. Even as the darkness began to descend on me I couldn't bring myself to want him to stop.

He didn't know that I felt this way. Yes, he knew that the way I felt about him had changed; but he didn't realise how deeply. I could recall everything; but right then, I didn't care. He was here, and that was all that mattered.

As his strong lips pulled the gushing blood from my neck, he saw it as nothing to me. He didn't realise that when I awoke again, I would remember all of this; just as had been doing since it all began.

A Promise Or Two

Alethea

I hated knowing what was in store for Miranda. This week, it was her that was destined to have her heart ripped; and all I could do was stand by and watch. I prayed that it wasn't now - that he would hold on to her for one more day; but I asked for that every day; and eventually, her day would come. I had seen the way Kenneth looked at her, and, despite my best hopes, I knew that day was coming soon.

It was well-known that Kenneth Edwards - the gorgeous, sapphire-eyed wonder of our very school - only paid attention to one person at a time; he only paid attention to one girl at a time, and he moved on again quickly. This girl was basked in popularity from the moment he chose her, but when he moved on, she returned to obscurity.

Often, his newest fixation was known by everyone before she knew herself. When the school bell rang, at precisely three, he would be waiting by his chosen girl's locker for her to arrive. After a few days, the cycle finished and he didn't wait there, he waited for someone else. Even in a school as small as ours he never saw the same girls twice.

Some lucky souls only held his seducing gaze for a few days, with his longest relationship standing at about two weeks. I didn't understand how these girls could become so attached to him in such a short time; but they were always devastated when he ended things with them.

There were much better guys to be with throughout the school; there were the sporty ones, the funny ones, the clever ones, the cute ones; all of whom would just dump you in a second's decision. I was sure I couldn't be the only girl who saw that he did this to people. If you know he's going to disappear in a few days, you shouldn't let yourself rely on him. I'm not just saying this as a way of retaliation; as it

happened, he hadn't 'chosen' me yet; but I was dreading when he did.

Whoever he gave his attention too not only lost track of everything; but they ended up completely cut off from their friends. He didn't like the idea of him sparing his time for you, and then you didn't care for him. That tended to make these relationships involuntary, although no-one seemed to care about that.

He had certain tells that hinted when he was going to move on. I knew this, and I'd seen them lately in his eyes. All I could hope was that I was reading them wrong. Whoever he was involved with at the time was often too smitten to read these signs themselves. Miranda absolutely adored him; and I knew he was about to break her. Every few seconds my eyes would wonder back to the ticking clock on the wall; counting down the seconds to my salvation or my best friend's devastation.

Mercifully, bell rang. Part of me was warning me that I should slow down; telling me that if it was today, I didn't want to think about it and I should remain in

ignorance for as long as possible. The other part was shrieking at me to make sure my friend was alright.

She'd changed. I still had the spiteful messages she'd sent me in the last week stored on my phone; but I knew it wasn't permanent. It was only as temporary as Kenneth, and that meant it would be over quickly. Then she would need her friends to comfort her.

I noted the two week assignment that I now had to do for this class. I would start it tonight. Or tomorrow. If Miranda was ok.

My eyes swept the width of the hall and my heart stopped for a moment. They jumped desperately back to locker 267, but there was no Kenneth stood beside it. As soon as that registered, I was searching the hall for Miranda; if he wasn't there now, he wasn't going to be.

Miranda's twinkling eyes were focused on the empty space. My heart squeezed to see her so upset. I wasn't the only person to notice; but I was the only one to begin to fight my way towards her. She'd managed a whole week in Kenneth's attention, and jealousy was never a rare thing at this school.

"Miranda," I said softly as soon as I reached her. I put a comforting arm over her unmoving figure and steered her away.

Brad was by my side in a second and I dropped my hand so that he could replace it with his. He had been crushing on Miranda for two years to the day, and his expression when we'd seen Kenneth beside her locker last week had mirrored mine. Horror. He knew as well as I did that it would end in her getting hurt; and, just the same as me, he knew there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Every day that he was with her was setting her up for a worse fall, but we always wanted another day. I guess we were hoping that those days would keep stretching and that she wouldn't have to fall in the end.

"Forget him," I whispered comfortingly in her ear and we wove through the throng of people swarming towards the school's entrance.

"If he can pass you up, he's not worth it," Brad murmured. He glanced away from her for half a second and his eyes widened slightly. He made to

turn Miranda away, but she had seen. She burst into tears and sprinted back the way we had come. In the brief moment when I looked away from her fleeing person I recognised the reason.

The guy in question was standing beside my locker.

Tears hit my eyes as I saw what was waiting for me. If he was there, I wouldn't have a choice - I only wished that I was strong enough to not get sucked in by his voice and his eyes. My eyes stung lightly as I realised that what I had just witnessed - my best friend's tear-filled eyes - was what I would be like in only a few days. I vowed that I would not be subdued to that.

I made to follow Miranda, but Brad stopped me.

"I wouldn't," he cautioned. "You're the last person she'll want to see now."

"I can think of one other," I replied; but I knew he was right.

My eyes wandered painfully back to the sapphire pair watching me. My chest tightened. The only comfort I had was that every other girl he'd

destroyed had been smitten with him to begin with. I wasn't. Please let that make a difference.

"Brad, you have to help me," I said. "I don't know if I can..."

"I will," he €he told me. I didn't want to change the way that Miranda had and to be so hatful to my friends for such a short time; especially when I knew I would need them afterwards. Friends are safety. His earth-brown eyes flitted down the corridor, and I knew what he wanted to say.

"But Miranda first," I agreed, making to go after her again. Brad held me back and I turned to him.

"If you don't go over there, he'll come after you," he stated correctly. I heard the tone in his voice. He still cared, and didn't want to leave me to this. It just wasn't as strong as his aversion to Miranda being submitted to it; but that was because of the crush. She had been thrilled when she saw Kenneth; I on the other hand, was distraught. Talk about opposites.

I nodded once at Brad and he disappeared in the direction Miranda had gone. I pulled all of my nerves

together and turned back to my locker, still with the unwanted addition. I was half proud, this would probably be a first for him; someone who didn't want his attention.

Eyes fell away from me when I turned; and, despite everything else that I knew was coming, I felt a stab of annoyance. People were already gossiping. As I took the first step, I even saw Ms G shoot me a pitiful look. The teachers knew what happened to the girls he chose, but couldn't really do anything about it - after all, they were there out of choice. It was customary for any girl that he'd chosen to turn into the corridor, halt for a second and then continue, glittering and beaming, until they reached him. I vaguely wondered what he would make of my exchange.

"Alethea," he said with a smile when I reached him. His smile was tight and amused, even a little smug. Cleary, he didn't think anything of the conversation that had just passed; and assumed that I was just another girl who would fall willingly into his arms.

"Kenneth." I nodded my head slightly. It was a form of acknowledgement, nothing more, nothing less; and my tone was formal. I kept my eyes on my books as I grabbed them out of my locker and pushed them into my already-overflowing bag before turning away.

It was hard not to look at him. He really was gorgeous. His eyes were a deep, misleading sapphire and his hair was brown, the shade somewhere between that of bark and of a faded photo's. He had a strong jaw, and his skin was slightly tanned, quite impressive for January. I kept my pace normal as I walked out of the school, my new tag-along only half a step behind.

"So," he said, almost as if continuing a conversation we'd been having that day. At this point I consciously realised the simple fact that I had never even spoken to him before. And that his voice was lush. It was soft and just imploring attention. "Tonight then?"

"What about tonight?" I asked bluntly, not turning my head to look at him. It was obvious enough that I was with him without giving the whole school the

satisfaction of me being pulled easily into his repetitive game.

"Any plans?"

"Not so far," I replied honestly. Usually, I hated living in the opposite direction to most other students at my school because it meant I was always alone when I walked home at the end of the day. Today, I was extremely glad of it; the quicker I was away from goggling stares the better.

"So how about if you and me-"

"No thanks," I interrupted before he could get any sort of invitation out. He stopped, but I ignored that and kept going. I was three steps ahead by the time he regained the ability to move.

"What did you say?" he asked, quickening his pace slightly before falling back in step beside me. I knew that I shouldn't refuse him; he managed to get that straight to the population from the day he arrived, but I was pleased by the disbelief in his tone.

"I said 'no thanks'," I repeated. I let my eyes wander down to my watch, strapped constantly to my wrist.

It was old and battered, and I desperately needed a new one; but I didn't have the money for a decent one at the moment. "Now if you don't mind, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Alethea," he said, stopping again. The ice on his voice sent a shiver through me and I stopped too, suddenly recalling the reasons for my fears of his invitations. "Do you want to try that again?"

I gulped but didn't turn to face him. He was athletic, so running was out of the question; especially since I was still twenty minutes away from my house. The chills ran through me as he waited, motionless, for my answer.

"I'd rather not," I explained, my body tensed for his reaction. Ignoring my best efforts, my voice shook, showing how nervous I was. I didn't glance back at him. He didn't move, and, neglecting every thought I'd ever had about him, I bolted.

He could catch me; I knew he could. I eventually gave in at the end of the road and my eyes slipped back as I turned the corner. He was still stood, immobile - a single figure in the centre of the empty lane.

Kenneth

No-one turned me down. Ever. And she just had.

I knew where I was, and that meant that I had to be in control. Usually, the girls were just another distraction; just something to keep my mind off of the things I could be doing whilst stuck in a bland, aged classroom for studies I didn't even need to do. If we had been anywhere else, she would have sorely regretted that sentence the second it was out; but having just had another warning from Damian, I knew better than to strike her now.

The only thing I could do to stop myself from reacting that way was to stop all reactions. Being still wasn't exactly difficult, or calming, but it help regain control when my anger tried to take over.

She wouldn't do it again. I would make sure of that. I only had to remember how breakable and frail these insignificant humans were. She would change her response before anything happened to her.

I slowly shook my head, aware that the beating rage within me needed some kind of outlet. I turned stiffly

away but before I even thought it I was running. The wind whipped my face and pushed my hair back as I gained speed. I intended to go directly home, at least for a moment, but the distance seemed too short so I took a detour through the maze of a forest that shrouded our house in everlasting shade.

Alethea

When I got home I was breathing heavily. I put my hand on my rapid chest as I attempted to calm it. I shouldn't be so scared of him. What was I scared of anyway? He was violent - that was hardly something that should have me running for my life. For all I knew, he got over all of that ages ago anyway. No-one had had the nerve to stand up to him since Wendy, and that hadn't turned out in her favour.

So it wasn't the anger that I was scared of. It was the solid fact that every other girl he had ever chosen had ended up in tears and an outcast from the school body for at least three months. I wasn't ready fro that. the thing was, the others always seemed oblivious to that. They never realised what waited for them when this obsesser moved on; but I did -

and that meant I had all the time in the world to dread that moment.

If I knew what was going to happen, and I was totally aware of it; then shouldn't I be able to avoid it? Seeing as I knew what to expect; shouldn't I be able to prevent the feelings that would try to pronounce themselves in the next few days? I wanted to believe it, but after seeing so many people fall; it was hard to convince myself that I was any different.

The tears that had formed at school started to fall now. Miranda was just horrified that I was next. He could have picked any girl in the school, and I would have been fine. He could have picked me instead of Miranda, but to pick me right after her was just cruel. Did he even notice how much it hurt her? Did he care?

I started when the doorbell rang. After a moment of paranoid reluctance, I got slowly up from my low bed and slipped out into the hall. Even through the patterned glass beside the door I recognised the figure and hurried down the stairs to wrench the door open.

"Hey trouble," I said, lifting Charlie quickly up into my arms. I turned to Jo. "I hope he wasn't too much of a bother."

"Oh, no worries hon," she assured me. Her quick eyes took in my tearful state, but I changed the subject before she could comment.

"Mum said to apologise for forcing him on you for the day," I told her, smiling. It was almost impossible for me to be upset with Charlie near by. "I can't tell you how much we appreciate it - what with Dad away on business and Mum working extra hours."

"Don't worry," her enveloping voice said. "He had lots of fun with Jack, didn't you?"

Charlie clapped happily in my arms and I beamed. Maybe a thirteen year age gap between siblings was the secret to them getting along. Mum had had me when she was nineteen, and the three year old in my arms was practically the centre of my world.

Charlie yawned happily and his eyes started to droop. He could be out in a second when he wanted to be.

"I should probably get the little terror upstairs for a nap," I noted. "Thanks again."

"Anytime. I'm seeing the little guy again tomorrow aren't I?"

"If you don't mind," I replied. She laughed and started to turn away. I waved her to the end of the drive, and picked up Charlie's hand for him to wave too. His head was leant comfortably against mine when she pulled away.

Still smiling, I turned inside and manoeuvred around the door, hitting it shut with my hips. The sleeping boy in my arms clung lovingly to me as I carried him upstairs. I'd just set him down when the phone started ringing. He stirred, so I dashed out the room and half ran, half leapt down the stairs to grab it before he could wake.

"Hello?"

"Hey love," my mum's exhausted voice replied. My problems from school were already forgotten. Charlie was the perfect antidote to anything for me; his bleach-blonde hair falling in gentle curls over his

chubby face and his sky-blue and innocently curious eyes remedying anything wrong.

"Hi," I sighed. It wasn't an unhappy sound, it was completely relaxed and content. The serenity washed though me without a pause.

"Listen, honey," she began, slowly. "I have to work late tonight..."

"Again?" I asked. "But you were out late last night, and you did the morning shift today. Are you running the place or something?"

"No," she laughed. I could easily hear how tired she was. "But these holidays don't come cheap."

"Is it really worth it if you don't have the energy to enjoy it at the end?"

"Trust me baby, everything in life is worth working for. The harder you work to get it, the better it is to experience. And anniversaries don't come round often."

"No, only once every year," I joked.

"Exactly," she concluded. "So are you ok for one night?"

"Yeah, Mum, sure."

There was some hectic sound down the line and my mum became jumpy in that second. "Ok hon, I'll see you tonight."

"Yeah," I repeated, but she'd already hung up. I shook my head at the receiver, imagining that my mum could somehow sense the motion.

Fifteenth wedding anniversary. It wasn't a big number, but it meant enough to my mum and dad. It was also the twentieth anniversary of the day they met. Yes, my mum married at seventeen; but she'd never been held back by it. In exactly nine days, my parents would be off to London for a few nights at one of the most expensive hotels they could reach. Mum was going to be working over time for months afterwards as well to try and pay for it all.

"Love, what's the matter?"

I wasn't faking the headache. I will admit to exaggerating it a bit and inventing a stomach ache to

go with it; but my head was already throbbing like mad and it didn't take much acting.

"Mum," my voice was shaking. I knew that it was the terror at the thought of going to school; not the pain that did it, but it added to the effect. She put her hand on my forehead. "Can I stay home?"

"Oh hon, is there no way you can make it to school?" she asked; sea-eyes sparkling as her maternal instincts battled with her need for the money. "I really don't think I can miss a whole day..."

"Mum you don't have to stay," I said weakly. "I'll just be in bed all day anyway. Please mum..."

She glanced at the clock. She was already running late. "Alright love, but be good, alright?" I nodded slightly and she flashed me a sorry look as she snatched her folder off of the table and bent down to pick Charlie up. She was going to drop him off a Jo's for another play-date with Jack. Mornings were hectic enough for her as it was, without adding a sick daughter to the equation.

Charlie squealed happily and I flinched slightly when the sound pierced my thoughts. I plastered a smile on my face for him for a few seconds. I waved them down the street before grabbing some paracetamol out of the cupboard and heading upstairs back to the comfort of my bed.

Stress gave me headaches; but only when it was severe. A lack of sleep also gave me headaches. Stress also gave me trouble sleeping. Seeing as I had a severe amount of stress from yesterday rattling around my mind, just as I had all night; I wasn't doing too well.

Kenneth

That left me. She wasn't here; and I wasn't ready to move on. That meant, that for the first time since I'd arrive here, I was alone at the final bell. I stared back at the other students who let their curious eyes find me. They dropped their gaze as soon as I saw, but I kept my eyes on them for another few seconds. That made them uncomfortable.

Vaguely, I felt the want to know what was wrong with her. Was she really ill, or was she just bunking?

No, Alethea Day wouldn't do that, she cared too much for her grades to just bunk. Could she be staying off to avoid me? No, she was just another girl; and that meant she wouldn't do that. They gave everything they could to me, and were willing to do more. It was almost pitiful. Even if she was staying off because of me, she would be back tomorrow.

I shook my head as the sceptic eyes following me started again. Eventually, I pushed away from my position by the wall and just started to walk. I hated this. It wasn't the humiliation that the person who was currently supposed to be with me was absent, it was something else. I knew that I could move faster than this. Part of the reason for these continual distractions was that it helped me act more human.

When I was with them, as I should be now, it was easy to involve myself in thoughts about them and to stay with them. Sometimes it was harder than others. That was why my time with people varied so continually. My last choice had been better than most, she wasn't so self absorbed that all she could

think about was herself; but she wasn't so obsessed with me that she just wasn't there.

They wore through me so quickly. Staying with one girl was just bland, especially when they can think of nothing better than to just watch you as time elapses around them. Humans are so prosaic.

Without someone beside me, it was harder. I knew that I could be home in a flash if it wasn't for all of the nosey stares that were trailing after me. I considered sprinting - at least it would give them something to see - but Damien entered my thoughts again. According to him, I was making too big a scene as it was.

I gritted my teeth as I sluggishly approached the school gates. I hadn't had to do that in a long time. I hadn't had to be alone in a long time. In the space of twenty-four hours, this girl had annoyed me so many times. I knew what Damien would say. He just wants to avoid another scene. He would just tell me to forget her and move on. But I wouldn't do that. That would be like giving up. She was just another human

girl; and just like any other human girl, she would come back and adore me.

I smiled to myself. She was going to enjoy this. She just became the most interesting thing in my life. If she wanted to be different, that was fine; I would just have to teach her the consequences of individuality.

Miranda

She was brave. The only way that she could be with us was if Kenneth had already changed targets. If he had already changed, I couldn't imagine how she felt - less than a day.

She seemed normal, but she looked strange to me. She was stressed. She ignored everything for herself and went on as if nothing had happened with him; as if he'd never seen her. I wished I could be that strong; I was still battling with the pain that he'd left. I thought I was special; he made me think that I was special, but I clearly wasn't.

The bell eventually rang. Even in this pit of depression I recognised the relief. It was only lunch; just forty minutes before we were back in Algebra

class, but it was enough for now. We ate in silence, and when out break was almost up, we stared to head towards the maths block. Everyone else was doing the same, so when we got there, the corridor was quite crowded.

Brad walked between us. I still wasn't ready to be alone with her yet. Kenneth had gone to her right after me; that was like choosing her over me; and although I knew that wasn't her fault, I wasn't ready to face it just yet.

I saw Alethea stiffen slightly. It didn't take long to see why; and I felt my posture rectify as well. The odd thing was, his eyes didn't move over us in the way that they should. Kenneth focused on Alethea and when he took a step towards us, she froze completely. She suddenly became very pale; and some of the protection that had survived with our battered friendship lit in me and I hated to see her so terrified.

In the second when I didn't look away from her, Kenneth was there. Whatever colour that was left in her expression completely drained out of it as his fuming eyes hit hers. She stepped back slightly.

He didn't say anything, Kenneth's hand just locked around her wrist. I saw Mr Palmer turn conspicuously away down the corridor. I hated the way the teachers just left him to it. If they told him off, he just stood there and listened; if they gave him detention he didn't show up; and if the suspended him he came into school anyway. He practically ran the school.

I could see that Alethea was tense, and I just wanted to say to her to go, but I couldn't do it. Whether it was because I wanted any attention from him I could get and I would gladly change places with her, or it was because if I said anything, it might make it worse for her, I wasn't sure.

I was barely conscious of Brad's arm across my shoulders. He was rubbing my arms gently and trying to pull me away, but I wouldn't move.

Kenneth knew she wasn't going to come, but he gave her the chance anyway. When she didn't move, there was a single second where nothing happened, and then he pushed her up against the lockers lining the walls. Her breath was knocked out of her, and her

eyes widened. I didn't hear what he whispered in her ear.

She tried not to do it, but he saw when her eyes jumped to me, and then his followed. They slid back to her, considering; and then he let her go. She didn't fall, but leant heavily on the lockers, he legs unable to support her weight. Brad pushed me behind him but I didn't have it in me to object.

"Don't," said Alethea's weak voice. Kenneth's smug eyes swivelled back to her. She had her eyes closed and I knew that meant she was in pain. They opened, and touched his. "Don't."

The high bell rang out around, and the stillness in the air surrendered to the commotion as people tried to get to their classes. I hadn't noticed until that moment that people had been staring. Kenneth looked at the vibrating metal on the wall and then smiled to himself, before turning away, as if nothing had happened.

Brad's eyes followed him, but they soon came back to Alethea. Her eyes had followed him as well. Brad moved away from him to go stand beside her.

"Al-"

She shook her head before he could finish. Everything suddenly clicked when her tearful eyes met mine. Mine were dry until that point.

It wasn't that he'd moved on; she was just refusing him. Not only would that hurt her, and him, but it hurt me. She had everything that I wanted, and she was tossing it aside like last week's dirt. She started to say something, but I stepped back again. As the tears started to boil over, I ran.

When my eyes ignored my will and looked back to them, Althea's eyes were still following mine, and Brad was restraining her; stopping her from following. I owed him so much. I looked away and again as I ran.

Alethea

He waited until she was out of my view and then my body slumped. I couldn't believe what he had just done. My wrist was raw and my chest was sore where his forearm had push against me. Brad didn't move.

"Brad, go" I said slowly. He hesitated. "Go."

"Alethea," he began. "I can't-"

"She needs you more than I do," I told him. I wasn't able to meet his eyes, and I wasn't sure that this was true. I did know that even if I needed him more, he wanted to be with her, and I didn't want to have to push what I was feeling off onto him. If he was always going to have to choose between Miranda and me, I knew who I wanted. He didn't have to suffer with me; and he needed Miranda just as much as she needed him. He promised to help me; and now I realised that no-one could.

My heart rate wouldn't calm, and it almost hurt as it raced in my chest. I could barely believe how terrified I had been.

It looked as if I was going to do this alone.

Kenneth

Well...I knew she wouldn't avoid me again.

No-one stood me up. Her stubbornness was really beginning to get on my nerves, and that was not the

best idea in the world on her part. Yesterday, I knew she just hadn't been here; today I had know she was avoiding me, and now she knew not to do it again.

I wouldn't have do anything serious to...to...Miranda; only enough for Alethea to know that I could. I hadn't even had to do anything and she'd known that I could. That was good. She knew that I wouldn't be afraid to do these things.

I heard the whistle outside. Part of my mind was telling me that I should be out there, but the main part was telling me not to worry. No-one cared if I bunked off physical ed. Most people were even pleased when I did; it gave someone else the chance to achieve something. The gym was dark around me, only slithers of the sunlight daring to intrude the black room.

This was going to be awkward. Just as she had known that I wouldn't have any objection to hurting them; I'd seen that she wasn't going to comply if I hurt her. I was almost positive that I could break her of that, but resilience was just a time waster. She should know that. In fact, she did know that, but it

didn't stop her. I wasn't used to this, but the challenge she provided was only going to intrigue me further.

Most of the girls were so entranced that they didn't need this kind of treatment. If I told them to go and die, I had no doubt that most of them would. Alethea was different.

She knew that if she didn't do what I wanted it would hurt her; but she didn't care. At least, today she hadn't. Maybe when we were alone, and I wasn't confined by the constant eyes of humans I could show her what she needed to be afraid of.

It shocked me when the bell rang. There was always a few minutes before anyone got out of class, so I ran. No-one saw me. When everyone started to emerge from their classes, I was already by her locker, waiting.

I already knew where she was. She'd skipped class, but knew that I would be here, and that she needed to be too. When she turned the corner, I saw the last spark of a hope for my absence disappear from her eyes.

She hid her thoughts as she came over, keeping her expression plain. If I was able to forget this morning and the day before last; I might have believed the impartial appearance she had. As I couldn't forget them; I found it easy to see how reluctant she was as she came over. I decided to neglect them, even if I couldn't forget.

"Alethea," I said, smiling when she finally reached me.

"Kenneth," she replied with a nod of the head; identical to our first exchange. I had to fight a laugh at her tone. She'd get over that soon enough. I kept my eyes on her face for a minute and she turned away.

Just before she did, I saw the first tears in her eyes. Christ. I shook my head, but she didn't see. I was used to the eyes that followed me every day. It surprised me at how many lingered on her before they switched to me though. I fell into step behind her. She knew I was here, but refused to look at me. It was almost entertaining.

I rolled my eyes after a few minutes, but, of course, she didn't see that either. Her milk-chocolate hair was falling in sharp waves down her back, curling inwards at the ends. By the time she even glanced at me, we were away from the school, alone; and even I'd decided that the silence was getting ridiculous.

"I never pictured you as one for bunking," I mentioned. Her jaw stiffened for a moment, and when she replied I could clearly hear the tone to her voice; the tone that told me she didn't want to say anything.

"I never pictured you as one for your words earlier either. Maybe that says something."

"Aw, come on," I found myself saying. "Nothing happened."

She disagreed with me on that; I could see from the way she tensed. Ok, so I let my anger get the better of me on that occasion and my have pushed her a little too hard; but nothing really didn't happen. She didn't audibly reply this opinion.

"If you say so."

I noticed for the first time that she was limping very slightly. Maybe there had been more force behind that shove that I'd realised.

"So," I began. "How the outlook for tonight?"

She bit her lip, but her expression and posture glossed over quickly. She didn't look at me again. "I don't know what you mean."

"Any plans?" I clarified with a sigh. She didn't reply. I hated asking questions and not getting an answer, so when I spoke again, my tone was less than friendly. "Alethea."

See looked upwards for a moment. She didn't want to be here, but that didn't make it any better. She was chewing on her lower lip. Even nervous she looked great. For a moment, I lost my focus as I really saw her face. One more chance...

"Do you have any plans tonight?" I asked in a dead voce. If she didn't answer this time, our little scene from school this morning would replay itself; but without all of the onlookers, it would be slightly different.

"Actually," she said hesitantly. Her voice was stiff and worried, and she was tense. She predicted my reaction, but I waited for her to finish. She kept walking as she spoke. "I do."

"What?" My teeth were gritted; my fists were clenched; and my mind was roaring. This girl was pushing her luck.

"I've got to look after my brother," she said quietly. She didn't risk a glance at me.

"And what happened to your mum?" I asked, stating the obvious.

She gulped before she answer, hearing the surging heat in my voice. "She's at work."

"Your dad?" I inquired.

"He's away...working." She didn't think I would believe it; and was therefore weary of my thoughts. Unfortunately for me, I did believe it.

"Perfect," I mumbled.

She shot me a look which I decided to ignore. Apparently, she didn't like the idea that I had better

ideas than being stuck in a house with her brother. After a moment, her eyes flicked back to the scratch on my arm. She looked away quickly when I caught her looking, but I felt the need to answer her question anyway.

"Llewellyn," I said. Every when she didn't look at me I saw her expression was confused, so I answered the follow up question. "Dog."

She nodded once, staring forward again.

Silence wasn't exactly unusual with me; although normally, the silence was because the girls I was with were too obsessed, with either me or themselves, to care for conversation. I shook my head, keeping my eyes on her. Now that I really looked at her, I didn't want to look away.

The silence lasted the whole trip.

Alethea

Here I was, stood in my kitchen, a glass of tap water perched on the table beside me. My schoolbag was already upstairs; my clothes already changed; and my daily call to say Mum would be late out of the

way. Not to mention my personal nightmare facing me from across the room.

There was a knock at the door. My special miracle had arrived home. I stopped the smile before it touched my lips, not needing Kenneth's misconceptions to add to his ego.

"Stay here," I told him simply, heading out and into the hall. I pulled open the door and Jo was there again, with Charlie in her arms. She gave him quickly to me and I was beaming again.

"Is your mum working again?" she asked.

I nodded. "I think she's running twenty-four-seven now."

"So you're here on your own?"

"Not for long, but yes," I answered. Her eyes flicked past me and I heard the sounds and Kenneth strayed easily out like he owned the place. I should have known better than to expect him to do what I asked. My eyes flicked to him as well. "Yeah, Kenneth was just on his way out."

"Oh," Jo said.

"I wasn't aware that I was on my way out," he commented quietly. The glance I gave him didn't hold as much distaste as I'd hoped, but only because Charlie was nodding off again.

"I'm sure you were," I replied harshly. Jo was at the bottom of the path and didn't hear the comments. She turned back and I waved quickly to her before stepping out of the way for Kenneth to get past as she drove away.

"I'm not going," he stated, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. I stared at him for a moment and shifted Charlie in my arms. I just stepped past him.

"Close the door after you," I told him coolly. I was two steps up the stairs when his strong hand caught me by the arm and turned me where I stood. I tottered precariously for a moment, but he held me upright. I tried to get out of his grip, but only gasped when it tightened. I moved Charlie as far from him as I could in the space, his sleeping body weak and fragile in my arms.

"I said," he emphasised. "I'm not going."

His beating eyes stayed, unwavering, on mine. I lifted my chin slightly and looked down at him, but I knew that I couldn't do much if he decided to stay.

"If you insist," I said, my tone as cold as frozen ice. "But if you are staying, I'd prefer it if you let me but my brother down for his nap."

His lips twisted into a tight, arrogant smile. He kicked the door shut behind him without turning and his hand let go of my arm. I caught my balance before I could fall, making sure to keep myself between him and Charlie. My eyes fell to the red marks his grip had left on my forearm, and without a word, I turned and continued calmly upstairs.

He didn't follow me, and that small act brought far more relief with it than it should. I put Charlie down in his room, and then just stood watching him sleep. It was relaxing. He looked so carefree.

My right hand absentmindedly ran over the red blotches left on my skin by the clamp-like hold of the guy who was downstairs. It was going to bruise, that

much I was sure of. All I had to do was make sure that he didn't see how much it hurt.

Charlie's peach lips crept up into a supple smile, and I felt my expression mirroring his. His little hand pulled the bear beside him closer as he slept, and he curled up under the thick, blue blanket. It was so easy to forget everything when I was watching him.

Kenneth

My eyes rose once again to the ceiling. What could she be doing? I thought she literally meant put him down. I looked at the clock. I decided that there must be something wrong with it, the hands were moving way too slowly for it to be working properly.

I sighed heavily and turned towards the stairs again. I didn't hear any moment upstairs, but I wasn't worried. I moved silently up the shallow steps until I was on the landing.

Alethea

I turned to leave. I almost slammed into Kenneth, waiting in the doorway. I gasped and he chuckled.

"Out of everything that could worry you, you choose to be frightened when I don't do anything?"

"I wasn't frightened," I told him, slipping past him. I tossed my phone into my bedroom and closed the door as I headed down the stairs.

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," I sighed. He was so bigheaded - I couldn't even jump slightly without him thinking it was something to do with him. "Surprised, maybe..."

I headed downstairs without looking at him again and went straight through to the kitchen. I drained the rest of my water in one and rinsed the glass out before turning to face Kenneth. He was watching me; his eyes were at the base of the back door, and at the foot of it I saw a milky gaze meeting his. I hadn't noticed her at first because she was so still.

"Come here, Di," I cooed. I scooped her expertly up into my arms and turned to face our guest.

"Di?" he inquired. His loathsome eyes were looked on my ash-coated cat, held tightly in my arms. I waited a moment before reply, not entirely sure what was

passing between the two of them. They both seemed reluctant to look away from the other.

"Diana," I explained. It felt as if I was talking to myself with no-one looking at me as I spoke or reacting to the words. Diana's moon-like gaze was unmoving, and stayed on his sapphire irises without hesitation.

"The moon goddess," he muttered to himself. Then he blinked and shook his head. His baffled gaze focused on me. "Who names a cat Diana?"

"Who names a dog Llewellyn?" I retorted, offended. He considered that for a moment and then nodded his head slightly with an impressed expression.

"Touché."

I rolled my eyes and sighed. Diana felt tensed in my arms; she knew there was something wrong with him. I knew it was violence; I wondered if she did too.

Diana

He eyes finally moved. I didn't let mine do the same. There was something about him. He wasn't normal.

When his eyes touched me, which they did with protective frequency, they were disgusted. This wasn't the first time someone had looked at me that way, but it was the first time I'd felt the same way back. The arms around me were stiff and rigid; and didn't hold me in the gentle relaxed way they usually did.

Now he didn't look away; neither did I. I couldn't explain it, even to myself. He just wasn't right. I had a feeling I would find out why soon enough; that was the opposite of reassuring.

Alethea

Eventually, the tension in the air got too pronounced for me to ignore, and I bent down slowly to put Diana on the floor. As soon as I straightened up again she back towards the hall, still not moving her eyes. She plucked up her courage when she reached the door and hissed at him before sprinting away.

"Well, that was...odd," I said, not looking away from the spot where my cat had vanished. "She's never usually like that."

"Huh," was his only reply. I didn't think Kenneth was usually like that either, but what would I know?

I just shook my head. They'd be staying away from each other from now on then. His longest stretch was two weeks, and I was already on the third day. That meant I still had a while to go; but sometimes he moved on after a few days; and seeing as I obviously wasn't the normal sort of person for this (I didn't want anything to do with him, instead of absolutely adoring him) I was quite sure that he would move on faster.

When he didn't show any sign of moving, I left him to his thoughts and headed through to the lounge. I flicked the television on to try and dilute some of my thoughts, but it failed quickly. I ended up watching some old comedy; and all of the jokes were classics. Unfortunately, that meant they were also predictable, so didn't do anything to help me forget what was going on. I turned it off after only five minutes.

When I glanced over to the kitchen door he was watching me. I decided that I was picking up bad habits from Diana, because I didn't want to move my gaze from his. My eyes were tight and weary, his were almost thoughtful.

I eventually looked away, and then he spoke. He sounded different. His tone was sturdy and continual, like he wasn't saying the words; they were just coming from him. It was unnatural.

"I didn't see you yesterday," was all he said. My eyes stayed out the window.

"I know that," I replied quietly, worried about where this could be leading to. I tried not to be stiff, but I was tensed with caution.

"So, you know what that means?" I gasped and stood up when he was instantly behind me. His eyes weren't right; the sapphire was tinted with something else. They stayed on me and he didn't move, awaiting my reply.

My mouth wouldn't work, so I just turned my head slowly to the side as I shook it. I hoped that my insane pulse was just paranoia.

He smiled his tight, arrogant smile. Even that looked different, it was even more knowing than usual. I automatically took a step back and he grinned wider. His eyes narrowed slightly, anticipating something.

"You don't have to worry," he told me gently. He straightened up from his position bent across the sofa. He walked slowly around it, each movement exaggerated and controlled. "You won't remember anything anyway."

I stepped further back, heart racing again. I forced the words through my pale lips. "What do you mean?"

He laughed lightly. "I mean, you'll forget everything that's about to happen."

I didn't know what to make of that. What was about to happen? Why would I forget it? My frozen body would let me voice any of the essential queries, it only locked me where I was. He walked towards me.

Even though the motion was slowed to an antagonising pace, and every movement was exact; it didn't look like he was in control. He could have been in a trance.

He was in front of me. There was no movement or change in position, he was just there. It was almost as if he had been the whole time; but I knew that he hadn't. The only thing that told me he'd moved was the slight blur around him at his closeness.

Before I could move away again, his arms were around me, holding me to him. My eyes met his. Mine were wide with fright; his look half crazed. I could have believed that he didn't know what he was doing. His grip on me tightened as I tried to move away.

The strength he'd used on me earlier was almost nothing now. My entire body stiffened, but it did no good. He leant his head into mine and I turned away. I didn't realise that was exactly what he wanted until it was too late. His lips were on my throat.

"Don't worry," he said again; his voice using its full strength of seduction. "I promise you, you won't remember a thing."

For one second, he did nothing. Then, I felt his lips smile against my skin, and then they pulled back. His teeth pierced my skin and my breath escaped in a sharp gust. His tongue traced along the gash.

Kenneth

Her blood tasted different. Usually, any type of individuality was overcome by my regular need for the substance; so, between different people, there was rarely a change. But this was different.

Her struggles fell away in my arms and I relaxed slightly. She tried again to push me away, but I couldn't believe she was really trying. Blood loss make the body weaker, and even without that I doubted if her strongest shove could move me an inch. She breathed a low, quiet sound and her eyelids drooped. I moaned in satisfaction.

"It's a promise," I reminded her, whispering gently in her ear just before the unconsciousness hit.

Her blood was so good. It wasn't only different, it was reviving. It was as if I'd never truly tasted anything in my whole life; this was a new experience to me.

I wondered if it was because she didn't want this that it was so glorious. Every other girl had been frightened, but not unwilling when I told them I wanted to try something. They never struggled or protested; they all trusted me so completely. Alethea didn't.

I'd told myself that I would wait; that I would get to her to the state where she could remotely enjoy being with me. I wasn't going until she accepted that; she would be just like everyone else. It wasn't for her benefit; if I walked away while she still thought of me as she did, it was like giving up; and that was something I never do.

She was completely limps in my arms. A low laughed slipped from between my lips as I drank. I could say it was good; but that was such a diminishing understatement. This was the best blood I'd had in...I tried to do that maths in my head, but I couldn't

remember anyone's blood even beginning to compare to that.

I stopped. I didn't want to stop, but I knew that I had to. I was like a siren in my mind that told me when to stop; it meant that if I took more blood she would surely die; and I couldn't have that. Not only was killing her going to uproot everyone again; but it would be like surrendering to the idea that she hated me; and it would mean I would never get to taste her blood again afterwards.

Alethea

My eyes started to flicker open. I would have been happy to stay in my dream, but the blaring music I heard didn't want me too. Squeezing my eyes tightly shut, I brought both my hands up to cover my ears. The throbbing beat was pulsing around me, and rock music was definitely not what I wanted to wake up too.

After a moment, I rubbed my eyes and opened them to the beige ceiling of my lounge. I was laid out across the sofa, and I pushed myself up without a thought. I grabbed the remote off of the ground and

turned the music down before I did anything else. Kenneth was watching me.

"What happened?" I asked. How could I have fallen asleep? I hadn't even been tired, and one glance at the clock revealed I'd been out for three hours. That also meant I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight, planning a disastrous day for tomorrow. His lips flicked up at the corners.

"My guess would be you haven't been sleeping lately," he shrugged. I supposed that was true; I usually waited up for Mum to get back, and that was getting later and later each night.

"But I..." I trailed off. I hadn't done anything. I'd come in and turned the television on, and I had a vague memory of turning it off again. How could I fall asleep so fast I didn't notice?

"You?" he hinted. His tight smile was just begging for some kind of come back; but right now I couldn't think of one. I just shook my head, unsure of what I was going to say. My ears registered another sound beside the vibrating music.

"Is that Charlie?" I asked, standing instantly. How I'd slept through the music was a mystery to me; but I'd never once slept through his tears before Kenneth just shrugged. I gaped at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Why didn't you do anything?" I asked, already heading to the door. I felt insanely guilty on top of everything else. "He's crying for goodness sake! Could you not even go and check on him?"

"I don't know what he wants," he replied uncaring. The response stopped me in my tracks.

"Kenneth! He's three years old - he's not exactly going to ask you in perfect English to do something for him!"

He just shrugged. If it wasn't for the fact that Charlie's wails got louder in that second, I hated to think what I would have said; especially considering the bruises he'd already left. i turned and sprinted up the stairs.

Kenneth

And people say keeping promises is hard to keep.

Ok, so I clearly needed to mind what I said about her brother when she was around. Didn't brothers and sister usually fight? Well, it seemed there was nothing usual about this girl - extraordinary maybe, but nothing usual.

I watched her leave. She was hurried, but the movements still looked graceful. Her expression was the only thing wrong; but I'd seen it worse than that. My stomach clenched as my detail memory showed me once again the fear in her eyes from only a few hours ago.

The whole thing had been amazing; but I could still barely believe that I'd done it. Just as leaving now would be like giving up; drinking her blood before she'd changed her mind seemed like the same kind of failure.

I was suddenly jealous of my brother. He was older than me, so he needed the blood less often. He tended to stick to one human; and he normally got two pleasures in one night. The girl would only remember the first part of the evening; but he would

remember the sex and the blood. It didn't seem like a fair trade to me; but there wasn't much that could be done. I needed the blood every day. It was almost humiliating, being the youngest in the family. I should have known it was too ambitious not to want to have her blood, it was a struggle to miss one day; and seeing as yesterday I hadn't had any, today it was impossible to resist.

Even when I'd seen the terror in her eyes I couldn't stop; there was barely enough control to speak between everything. If she did remember that, not only would she be disgusted; but I wasn't sure I would be able to handle it. She'd just been so frightened. I was surprised that I'd noticed really; usually the blood would have overpowered recollecting anything like that. Again, it was different with Alethea.

I was aware of the eyes on me. It had become almost a sixth sense, and I turned to face the white, seething eyes of the black animal at the back of the room. Cats; how can anyone stand them? It didn't help that cat's were partially aware of the whole 'blood-

drinking' escapade; so they instinctively avoid us. I wondered what Alethea would think if 'Diana' went missing...

She came back then. With another hiss in my direction, and a brief moment with her back arched, the spiteful cat left the room; her tail flicking around the kitchen door just as Alethea entered the other one. No that I realised the crying had fully stopped, I turned the music off; it had only been there to drown out the noise in the first place.

My face - although I was unsure of what was showing on it to begin with - fell when I saw that she had the toddler in her arms. She set him down beside the sofa and he was engrossed in some object she handed him. I didn't even notice the look on her face for a short while.

"What?" I asked, shocked to see her with her eyebrows raised.

"If you're going to moan about him begin here, you can go," she suggested. "He actually lives here, unlike you."

"Did I moan?" I inquired.

"No, but the look on your face said you were going to."

I laughed, but it sounded forced, even to me. Then my expression changed again. "I told you I wasn't going, didn't I?"

"Yes," she agreed. She flinched slightly, but didn't put much thought into it. I felt ecstatic to see that the memories she still had didn't inflict the fear I had seen earlier into her stance. She looked nervous, but nothing more than that. At the same time; I felt like a monster that I had pulled that look through her features in the first place. Her eyes moved away from mine, and looked out of the window.

Her expression lit up. It took a minute for me to remember anything. I thought she'd been beaming when she'd seen her brother; but now it was even more than that. I would have believed it was possible until I saw it. Her lips only moved once, to say a single word.

"Dad."

Harry

"Dad!"

Alethea already had the door open, Charlie in her arms and was running out before I'd had a chance to turn the car engine off. I pulled the key out of the ignition and got out of the car. She put Charlie on the dry lawn and threw her arms around me.

"Hey Allie, how you doing?" I asked, laughing. I kissed the top of her head and ruffled her hair slightly. Charlie 'hmmped' from the ground and we both laughed. She stepped back and I scooped him up. He laughed.

"I thought you weren't getting back until Thursday," she said.

"Would you rather I went away again?"

"No," she said. Charlie mimicked her with a high, jumpy voice.

"That's great champ," I told him, flicking his nose lightly, making him giggle. "But first words only count once - you'll need some new ones soon."

"Dad, his first word wasn't 'no'," Althea told me, grabbing my bags from the boot of the car.

"Here hon, let me do them-"

"I've got them," she assured them. She balanced them for a second as she closed the boot. She was even able to snatch the key out of my hand and lock the car. She grinned.

"That's my girl," I said. Charlie squirmed in my arms to try and get back to her, I had to hold him quite tight so that he didn't get away. "Maybe we should trade."

"Don't worry Dad, I'll only be a second." With that, she vanished inside, hauling my multiple bags and cases up the stairs. I set Charlie down as soon as we were inside, and closed the door behind me. She was back in record time, picking an impatient Charlie up from the scarlet carpet and tickling him.

"Where's you mother?" I asked. She frowned slightly, but just managed to keep the smile in place.

"Working," she muttered. I nodded. When her eyes flew to the lounge she couldn't keep her expression

straight and it fell. Her voice was stiff and she gestured towards the lounge as she spoke. "Dad, this is Kenneth."

My eyes hit the boy stood in the doorway. I noticed the change in my tone; but what father would be a bit shirty when he gets home from work to find a lad in the house?

"Harry," I told him, holding out my hand. He shook it without a word, but his hand was strong. "Nice to meet you."

He smiled lightly, but his eyes didn't stay on me for long; they were focused on my sixteen year old daughter, a motion that I wasn't all too pleased about. I let my sceptic eyes slide to her, but she looked even less pleased with the attention than I did.

Her brown eyes were on his, and whereas his weren't betraying any emotion at all, hers had just a hint of annoyance. She hid it well, and I wondered if Kenneth saw it himself. If he did, he certainly didn't care. Charlie squealed, forgotten in her arms, and she turned her attention back to him. Her eyes leapt back to Kenneth once, showing the strength of the

annoyance, but when she looked at Charlie, that all melted away.

Charlie's eyes had followed hers, but he didn't turn away as easily. Alethea was aware of this and turned where she stood, blocking Charlie's view of Kenneth. Apart from the faint reluctance at the movement, it could be considered casual. It was as if she didn't want to turn her back on him.

I flicked him a glance, trying to gauge some of what had happened in my absence. I hadn't thought much of it; a month was a long time to be away, but to know that she'd gotten this far without me here made me weary. Kenneth's eyes were on her back, almost straight through to Charlie. He didn't try to hide his distaste for him, and that didn't push him any higher in my book.

"I've got to go," Kenneth said. He moved slightly towards the door, but didn't turn his head. His eyes softened for a second when he looked to Alethea and away from Charlie. She didn't show any sign that she'd heard him. I watched his features twist slightly;

annoyed by the silence, but he glanced at me and just left briskly.

Alethea glanced after him.

Alethea

"Yeah, he's been ready for the last ten minutes!" I called up to Mum. Charlie's expression made me laugh. "Yes, I'm talking about you."

When Mum got home last night I don't know how she managed it. She didn't manage to spot the black Octavia sat in the driveway and had the fright of her life when she walked into the kitchen to see Dad sat in his usual seat with the paper propped open on the table. He'd glanced up with a 'hi dear, how was your day?' just like any other day. Of course, a few seconds after that he'd given up the charade.

"Ok love, we'll be down in a minute!" Mum called back. I thought I was meant to be the teenager in this house; but here I was, having gotten me and my brother ready for a day out in the time it took my parents to start getting ready. For lack of anything else to do - and because Charlie can be incredibly

impatient - I launched another round of tickles on the unsuspecting infant. It was impossible not to laugh with him.

There was a knock at the door. My eyes jumped to it for a second, but what really caught my attention was the way Charlie suddenly fell silent. I considered that for a moment, my hesitation responding in a second, more impatient knock.

"Coming," I said loudly in the direction of the door. I grabbed Charlie one of his toys from the table and gave it quickly to him. He didn't look happy, but I decided that I should get the door before anything else.

"Back in a minute," I told him. I didn't want to pull my eyes away from his soft curls, but I ran my hand once over them and went out to get the door; Charlie's smile etched in my mind. The image was scratched by his weary eyes when I opened the door and saw the reason for it.

There he stood. The single guy who'd managed to turn my life into hell in the space of three days. When I'd known that eventually, he would turn to

me, I'd never imagined it would be like this. My pulse picked up just to see him stood there. Knowing that I had to tell him I was busy today as well wasn't high on my list of things to look forward to. There wasn't a line of lockers and a hall of students here; but there was my brother and parents; none of whom would know that I put up with this out of fear; and who would tell me not to stand for it if anything happened.

Diana

He hadn't noticed me. I had seen what he'd done last night - how could Alethea stand being so close to him now? Nothing had changed, she was still stiff and reluctant; but she wasn't frightened or disgusted; yet. I knew that sometimes humans have slow reactions, but this was beyond ridiculous.

A low snarl worked its way through my teeth, and his eyes found me. He didn't let her see I was here, but in the few glances I got, the hostility was minimal. Probably because he knew he couldn't do anything from this distance. I gave up keeping my opinions down and let out a fully-fledge hiss. My back arched

for a moment and I sprinted out the door before instinct took too far over. I could feel the fur on my body standing up at the knowledge that his gaze was on me.

Kenneth

She shook her head slightly, but she didn't know she was doing it. Her eyes were already starting to glitter. Part of me said that I should be able to see that, but the other part was telling me that I didn't want to. Her voice was desperate for an understanding.

"Kenneth-"

She cut off when my eyes narrowed. She still wasn't aware of what she was doing, and moved back a few paces. Words were lost in my throat - she wasn't about to ignore me again? She tried again, but was afraid to move her eyes away from mine. As if she needed confirmation of my reaction.

"Kenneth, I can't," she told me. Her tone was begging me to understand. "He's only just got back - Kenneth, I haven't seen him in a month, and even then he was always so busy - next weekend he won't be here, the

next, he'll be off working overtime to pay for the hotel."

"Hotel?" I asked; trying to distract myself with something trivial. All she did was nod once. I looked upward, not wanting to see her expression. Tears have never provoked sympathy with me; they did exactly the opposite. That should be one of the first thing I made sure she learnt.

"Please Kenneth, just today - he's giving up so much to be here this early, I can't just ignore that."

My laugh was tight and caught in my throat. "But you can just ignore me?"

"I'm not-" She fell silent and shook her head. I knew she was crying; and that was not something that would help either of us. "Kenneth, please, just the one day..."

My eyes sparked at the opportunity and fell back to hers. The chocolate shade was surrounded by a worry that hit me hard. Maybe I'd finally met someone who had the right reaction to someone like me.

"One day?" I clarified. She hesitated. "One day, and you'll stop avoiding me?"

"I haven't been-" she began automatically.

I scoffed. "Yeah right."

"I..." She looked up to the ceiling, and I could hear movement overhead. Then her eyes jumped to the lounge. Mine stayed on her face. I raised an eyebrow when she looked back to me.

"Well?"

She repeated the whole action. She began to shake her head again, but halted the action this time. She closed her eyes and held her breath for a moment. When she opened them it was a struggle to keep my eyes on them; it hurt to see her so torn.

"Yes," she agreed, defeated. "One day, and I'll...anything you want."

I don't know if she noticed that her body slumped slightly, physically beaten and held by the promise. I know that my lips turned into a smile. I couldn't explain to myself why her reluctance at the words

effected me; but I knew that my own pleasure overtook that.

"Perfect," I muttered, the single word holding more than I knew it could. With that, I turned and left. There was no need for me here; and that episode certainly made things easier for me. No more silence, no more aversion, yes, one day in exchange for it all was definitely in my advantage. She knew that too.

I heard the conversation inside, although I was already out of view of the house.

"Love - who was at the door?" I guessed that was her mother, the voice was more rushed and jumpy than her father's last night. There was no reply for a moment, and I could imagine her staring at the closed door and reliving the agreement that had just unfolded. I wanted to imagine that...

"No-one," her quiet voice answer. I imagined her turning away now, back to the lounge, where her chortling little menace was waiting. "No-one," she repeated to herself.

Alethea

What had I done?

I plastered a smile on my face. This day wasn't for me; this was for them. The day was dragging. I knew that I should enjoy this, my whole family; Charlie giggling and shouting; the day out at a theme park; the sun shining and the clouds running so fast across the sky that you could doubt they were real. But also my last day.

From tomorrow, I had promised every day to Kenneth; every day until he got tired of me - and when he did, I would be lost; just as every other girl had been. If I didn't want it, maybe things would be different; but maybe they wouldn't. Kenneth Edwards. It was a name I'd grown to dread when it was associated with mine; but now it didn't look as if I had a choice. When he moved on, I would just be another memory. There were plenty of rumours that said he didn't remember a girl from the time he moved on; and that seemed likely. I wouldn't be surprised if he practically forgot my name a week from today.

I watched my parents, pouring over Charlie, and I felt wrong. If I could just forget what I had promised this morning, I would be fine. I would be laughing and squealing and Charlie would be over here right now. I'd be running and jumping and racing for rides; but now I just couldn't. I would face tomorrow when it came, but as for today; this wasn't for me - this was for them.

I looked at the sky for a second and felt the false laughter force its way through my throat. I couldn't meet my brother's eyes I as I kept the act going; one glance into those sky-blue eyes would shatter any pretence I had. The battle for the day just got a whole lot harder.

Chapter 2

Blood Stained Ruby Part 2

An Immune Arrival

Alethea

"Don't do it," I said to my reflection. The lips of the girl staring back at me shuddered around the words. "Don't do it. Don't cry."

I had never had to tell myself that before. Until four days ago, I had barely ever cried. Until four days ago; everything had been fine. I could see the tears beginning to gather as the pair of brown, empty eyes returned my emotionless stare. My face around my eyes wasn't any different from the last time I'd looked

in the mirror, but it seemed sallow and wounded to me.

I pulled the towel out from around my hair and let the dripping strands fall down. My skin appeared even worse in comparison; the usually pale shade being highlighted by the darkened frame. I rubbed the towel furiously through my hair, trying to get rid of the millions of water droplets clinging to the locks. That couldn't distract me.

"Don't," I warned my own image. "Don't..."

No-one ever listens to their own advice; and apparently that rule is the same for orders. I tried again to tell myself to stop the coming tears; but even in my blank face it was clear I was going to fail. I bit down onto my bottom lip but after a moment my breath came in a gasp and I knew I had to sit before the shuddering convulsions pulsing through my body took my balance.

I turned the mirror away. I was lifeless, I knew that and didn't need any reminders. My sight was blurred, but I staggered over to the bed to collapse on it. My hair was all around me, wetting the pillow and

duvet; but I couldn't notice it. I suppressed the sobs into my clean pillow; knowing that the last thing I needed right now was for one of my parents to walk past and hear me crying. When the tears ran silently, I looked up.

How could everything have been so perfect two weeks ago? One week ago I'd even had the nerve to hope that thing would be fine again afterwards; to hope Miranda would be fine - I had never planned for any of the rest of this. When my gaze eventually fell to the ground, I met a pair of star eyes staring back.

"Don't look at me like that," I told Diana. Her eyes were knowing; which reminded me too much of the person I was dreading the arrival of. I heard a few sharp raps on the door downstairs, and my mind was immediately filled. I put my head back in my hands, and was practically praying that it wasn't him.

"Alethea!" Mum called. "It's Kenneth!"

If only she could know how much I didn't want it to be. I sprung off the bed and grabbed the hairdryer, turning it on full blast and aiming at my hectic roots.

Even through the roaring fan I heard Mum tell him to come up. I had to snap the hairdryer off and rush across to the bathroom.

The mirror in here did even less to compliment my distressed state than the one in my bedroom; and I couldn't turn this one away. I started the battle with the flannel and make-up to reduce the redness of my wet eyes. After a minute of two of frustration, I scrubbed the useless covers off, leaving skin-tone smears across the hand towel.

I splashed my face with cool water and controlled my breathing so that I could calm down. Why did I want to cry anyway? I knew the answer to that; I was frightened. I wasn't frightened of what would happen now; it was what it would be like in a week or so I couldn't forget. Today was today, and tomorrow was tomorrow; I would just have to get through it one day at a time. It wouldn't last forever.

I decided not to try makeup again. The way my day was going, everything would probably be running in half an hour. After a long while of controlling and willingness, I looked half way presentable, and

realised that the hairdryer that usually resides in the bathroom had vacationed to Mum and Dad's room for the week. My face fell. I was counting on that for another half hour.

I bit down on my lip and turned back to my room.

Kenneth

I was beginning to think that this girl had some serious problems. I eyed her dripping hair with an unimpressed expression. I knew girls took ages to get ready for anything, but it was ten o'clock and this was ridiculous. Her absent eyes laid on me for one moment, before she turned and corrected the mirror and the pine dresser. And grabbed the hairdryer, which lay, discarded, on the ground beside it. She started blasting it before I could say anything.

Her face was completely expressionless; and she didn't let her eyes move from her elegant hair as she styled it, not sparing me even one glance. Seeing as she couldn't object, I just kept my eyes on her the whole time.

When she was eventually done, I couldn't really complain about the time it took; she looked stunning. Or she would have, if it wasn't for the defence in her eyes and the protected expression.

Neither of us said anything for a minute but my eyes flickered when her phone lit up beside her bed. When my eyes returned, her were on the device, but she showed mo sign of retrieving it. I sighed and grabbed the phone off the side and tossed it to her. Her expression was slightly weary, but returned to its impassive state when I spoke.

"Get rid of them."

Her eyes buckled and she turned away. I trained my gaze out of the window, seeing only the clear sky from here. It didn't look clear to me. I had the sorrowful pair of retracted eyes intercepting my vision. I didn't want to think about why I couldn't push them out of my mind; but it was hard.

She flipped the phone closed again, but didn't turn back. Her shaking fingers ran around the small object. There was a little spark inside me that told me I shouldn't feel happy that she'd done it; but I knew

she'd get over it, so it didn't bother me too deeply. She put it gently down on the windowsill, and turned back to face me. Her eyes only rose to mine as she leant against the purple wall beside the open window, the slight but sharp breeze flicking her hair across her face.

Her whole stance was empty again; and when she spoke, even that sounded derived. She sounded wrong.

"So what are you planning for today?" she asked. Her hidden eyes were focusing on me, but they looked far away. I was about to answer, but her phone beeped again. She ignored it; not even sparing a glance.

"Aren't you going to get that?" I asked through my teeth. She shook her head, completely absent.

I raised an eyebrow, expecting her to have grabbed it the second it lit up; but instead she sighed, reaching for the phone. She flipped it open and something changed in her expression but it hardened again before I could figure out what it was. She didn't reply to whoever it was, only turning the phone off and

shoving it into the desk draw. She looked back to me, still expecting an answer. It was wrong.

"I was thinking it was time to introduce you to my brother," I replied honestly. I had only thought of it in that second admittedly; but perhaps he could try and decipher something that this girl was thinking.

In the space of one day she'd changed so fully; she was completely given over now - anything that I said she did, and anything I didn't, she wouldn't. Usually, that wouldn't be a bad thing, but it was wrong on her.

Amos

I moaned. This was good.

"You know I love you babe," I whispered in her ear. She was breathless, just like I was, but I still kept the words running. "You know that, don't you?"

Her tender lips found mine and I moaned as we continued. This was just bliss, and even that seemed an understatement. It was a long while before she answered, and an even longer while before I remember what she was saying.

"Yes," she murmured in the brief second when her lips only brushed mine. "Of course I know that."

I moved slightly and she moved with me. She closed her eyes as she let everything run through her. I knew she had to feel the electricity sparking in the air around us. I let my lips leave hers and they began to trace down her throat. She raised her head slightly, practically inviting. It was hard to believe she didn't remember what I wanted when she offered like this.

"And do you trust me?" I asked against her skin. I moved my weight carefully and rolled. She was under me, and could feel me against her but my weight wasn't on her. Her arms locked around me. Her heart was beating strongly on my chest.

"Forever and always," she replied. Even in her exhausted state she found the draining energy to smile. "You know that."

"Yes I do," I replied as sleep closed over her. For a second, I was still, savouring the position and the feeling flowing through me. Then I shifted and dove my teeth into her exposed neck. Her body shuddered

beneath me but she didn't open her eyes; the energy for such things was long gone.

All too soon the fatal warning in my head kicked in and I had to pull away. I rolled onto my back, my strong chest heaving before me. My heavy pants were the only sound aside from her now weakened heartbeat pulsing beside me. With a quick smile, a leant across and ran my tongue across the cuts, knowing they would be healed by the time she awoke.

The last traces of her blood lingered on my tongue and I closed my eyes as they dissolved, the taste sending shivering thrills around my veins. I sighed happily as I felt the exhaustion around me falling into my muscles. I rolled onto my side and put my steady hand over her heart and closed my eyes for a long, reviving sleep.

No sooner had they closed than I heard the sounds of an arrival downstairs. Damn him. I couldn't say anything; he lived here too. A harsh sigh slipped between my lips, but I made no effort to move, the

need for sleep pulsing around me. He never bothered me anyway.

He called my name and I groaned childishly. I pushed myself up and kissed my special girl lightly on the forehead, my lips slowing as they pulled away again. My hand just began to trace around her soft curves when my name was repeated from the floor below. My eyes shot a dirty look towards the locked door, but ached to be away from the gently flush of her face, and leapt back immediately.

Her darkened lips were relaxed and partially open. I pushed her thick, black curtain of locks away from her face, displaying the supple deepening of the red against her skin. Her breathing had already returned to normal, pushing her perfect chest up before falling again with each breath. I could imagine the contentment that would be hiding in those adoring, sea-sapphire eyes behind the close lids. Her thick lashes were beginning to brush my cheek as I lowered my head slowly down, feeling my eyes close in pleasure and my hand continued.

This time, the childish groan that escaped my lips was aggressive and almost a growl. I knew his persistence wouldn't leave me, so I crushed my lips to those of the sleeping girl beside for a moment, and then pushed myself off of the bed. My movements felt hurried as I scrambled for my jeans and a shirt, but I knew that really they were sluggish.

All I can say is that I hope he had a good reason for interrupting me.

Alethea

I didn't say anything as we waited; there just wasn't anything to say. Eventually, his brother appeared. He looked hassled, and slightly flushed. He also looked exhausted. He definitely didn't look pleased when his eyes hit Kenneth.

"What the hell-"

Kenneth held up his arm, showing a deep gash. Amos' words died in his throat and Kenneth spoke, keeping his voice harsh.

"That dog of yours is a right menace - and if you don't want him to disappear, I suggest you at least keep him away from me."

I couldn't say that I disagreed. Llewellyn had practically jumped at him, teeth bared, snarling. Sure, 'certain breeds' don't have the best reputations in the world, but I wouldn't think it was accurate. Kenneth had simply pushed me into the house with a heavy sigh as the dog growled and literally thrown him off, diving inside and locking the door just before he got in.

"Fine, deal, whatever," Amos shrugged, turning back up the stairs. "If you'll excuse me, I was sort of in the middle of something."

Kenneth smirked; another knowing expression. "I take it you're enjoying it then?"

Amos fought the grin that crept onto his face, but failed miserably. He forced himself up the stairs and went back to wherever he'd been before. That was a brief meeting. Kenneth turned to me and grabbed my hand, pulling me up the stairs. I had to remind

myself that what I'd promised him yesterday was anything.

Kenneth

"Ok," I told her quickly, suddenly unavoidably aware of how desperate I was. I dropped her hand and closed the door. Her eyes scraped the walls of my bedroom with uncaring sceptism.

I leant heavily against the wooden door, knowing that one wrong move would put that look of terror back on her face, and that no matter how much I needed blood now; that image would haunt me afterwards. I gritted my teeth to stop myself from saying something I would regret. She didn't say anything, but a hint of weariness was showing in her eyes.

"Ok," I repeated, trying to slow my race mind before it got too fast for me to control. "Yesterday..."

She wasn't looking at me now; her eyes were watching the lava lamp that stood, still lit, in the corner of the room. She wasn't surprised by the abnormality of the size; but didn't seem to be really

seeing it anyway. I knew her thoughts were warped around my trailing sentences.

"I didn't see you yesterday," I said. I knew why the words were familiar; but now that I'd already been through it once, I was able to control myself better. If I did this right, perhaps the fear didn't have to come.

She just nodded once, still not looking at me. The only way to stop myself from doing this, for moving so fast it was impossible not to frighten her, was to doing this slowly; and that was nearly torture to me.

"Alethea," I began. She sensed the change in my tone and looked at me. She didn't move, her eyes just shifted their position. The defence was giving way to nerves and I had to look away; it was too similar to the image I was trying to block.

She didn't move, and I had to hope that was out of stubbornness and not fear. It wouldn't surprise me if it was. I didn't move either, trying to get to grips with the need, pulsing its heating way through me and leaving me near helpless to its desire.

"Alethea," I repeated, but the words stopped. My uncooperative memory had just reminded me of the gorgeous surge as her beautiful blood heated my lips. Her more than anyone else. Against my will, my eyes flicked back to her.

I noticed the change in her expression and in her eyes, but I couldn't do anything to stop it. My movements weren't my own any more; they were possessed by the burning want raging inside me. The motion was slow, but I felt the anticipation slip into my uncontrollable expression. At least I knew that afterwards, she wouldn't recall it.

The puppeteer inside me had my arms around her in a second; exactly as he did before. Last time, I had wanted this, and was almost pleased by her struggles. Now, I didn't want it, but I couldn't stop it. I knew that the aching regret I felt didn't show through in any way, and was faced, once again, with her terrified, wide-eyed expression before the monster controlling me made me say her name again.

"Alethea."

It was slow and wanting - not the way I wanted my voice to sound. It didn't have anything more than the need for her blood behind it; and before I could even begin to tame the motion, my lips were against a fresh cut, pulling the warming blood from her limp body, trying harder than ever to tell myself to listen to the siren in my mind.

Amos

I hated this, I really did. Now that I'd been up and downstairs, not only was the whole mood ruined; but the exhaustion refused to do more than hover above me, just patronising me. I was tired, and I needed sleep; and it refused to come. Amasa owed me. All he'd done was tell me off about Llewellyn anyway - and somehow, that didn't seem like a good enough reason for halting the scene he'd interrupted.

Just as my thoughts started to drift, the very figure who wouldn't part from my mind threw open the door.

"Wow - Am-" I started; but he grabbed my arm and hauled me out into the chilled hall. He pulled me quickly down the stairs to the huge lounge. He let me

go and sank onto the sagging sofa. He had his head in his hands, completely covering his expression.

"You have to help me," he muttered, his voice displaced. I had never seen him like this before, and I thought I knew him well.

"Alright mate," I reassured him. My eyes skated down my body. "But trousers first, alright?"

"No." His hand was on my arm, holding me back and his eyes were frantic. "You can't leave me."

"Ok," I said soothingly. I snatched a towel off of the back of the couch and wrapped it quickly around my middle, seeing that, without a doubt, I couldn't leave. I sat down beside him and he had his head in his hands again. "What happened?"

He just shook his head, no words coming to mind. I immediately assumed the worst, but the sound of two heartbeats upstairs derailed that thought.

"What happened? Come on, it's not as if I'm going to judge you."

"I didn't think I'd..." he trailed off. He pulled his head out of his hands and looked at the ceiling, through which both of us could hear the beating. His expression was confused, dismayed and frightened; all in one. "I almost couldn't stop."

I calmed down a bit. "It's ok mate, we've all been there."

"No, you don't understand," he told me. "I just couldn't - it wasn't that I didn't want to, I almost physically couldn't. That's why I need you here, if you weren't - I'd just be up there..."

"It feels that way to start with, but you'll control it soon. Everyone has to go through that, the point where you don't want to stop, where you always want more. It passes."

He shook his head. "It doesn't pass - I know that much. You just learn to stop, but you never want to."

I remembered how much I hated to listen to the little warning in my head. He was right; but if I told him that I knew it wouldn't help him at all. "I know it's

hard, but I promise you - it doesn't seem that way forever."

"I almost..." he stopped, eyes far away. "It isn't just that. It's the taste, it's so strong."

"When did that start?" I asked automatically. My own brother was going through this and I hadn't known.

"It was only a few days ago - just with her," he told me. "She's not the same as the others, and it..." I remembered something.

"You were here yesterday," I stated. He nodded. "It's probably just that - you still need it every day, leaving it too long will make it harder."

"But even with that, when I was done, when the need was gone, I should have been able to stop. I almost couldn't. Amos, this isn't..."

"I really hate to tell you this, and God knows that if there was time I'd call Damien down," I said. He flinched and I changed that. "Ok, so maybe I wouldn't - but still..."

He was lost in his own thoughts, and I was having trouble keeping to mine. I remembered how hard it was when the want finally kicks in. To start with, you only need blood, you have to have it, but nothing more. Eventually, you start wanting it, and then everything gets harder. I'd had time to get used to it, but I hadn't forgotten how terrifying it had been when it started.

"Mate, it's probably just your time," I told him. He shook his head. "How would you know mate? Honestly?"

"I'm just sure it's not," he said. "It's only her, no-one else. It doesn't just suddenly start, and with her it did..."

He was right about that. I didn't know about her. It could be her, I supposed. Want doesn't just start within a second, it builds up. He threw himself off of the sofa and for a second I thought he'd go for the door, but he surprised me. I hoped that Symphony slept through the noise. The glass was shattered and littered the shining floor like a million diamonds.

"Calm down," I told him quietly. He stood perfectly still, looking at the shards with a hateful expression.

"Sometimes I can taste the difference," he told me; not moving or looking away from the remains of the broken window in pieces around him. "But not usually. Hers was just so different. It can't just be want - that would have worked on the others too."

"It's probably a lot of things," I reassured him. "Just a bit of everything together. The best thing for both of you is to just stay away from her."

"I can't do that."

Kenneth

"Why not?" he asked. "I know it'll be hard, but if you-"

"No, you don't get it - I really can't." I didn't know how to explain it. If I told him that it seemed like I was giving up, he would just tell me to swallow my pride and get over it - and he would be right; but it wasn't only that. If every day had been like today, I could probably do it. But everyday hadn't been like

today. If every day she'd been as absent as she was today, I could do it - but she hadn't been.

I wasn't sure I could just stop. It wasn't just her blood, it was something about her. She acted differently. When I was with anyone else; I had always thought that having them like that - so willing and hopeful - was exactly what I wanted; exactly what I needed. Now I wasn't so sure. Now I knew what it was like to have someone who was independent - and someone who held onto their personality around me, I didn't want to give it up.

Today she'd been completely given over. She did exactly what I said and nothing more; almost like any other girl. Except, unlike any other girl, she did it out of a promise; not an inability to think for herself. I thought that I'd hated individuality and anything different - I'd thought that I'd had everything I needed. I hadn't known anything was missing until I seen what I didn't have.

"Amos, I just can't," I told him. He saw something in my expression that must have told him what I

couldn't say; both the one that I didn't want to say and the one that I couldn't put into words.

"Don't risk everything for a reputation," he said softly. "You know that Lizzie will kill you if anything happens again."

"That wasn't my fault," I repeated through my teeth for what must have been the millionth time. "I've had enough of this from Damien..."

"I know mate," he promised me. I was suddenly engrossed in the memories of our last home. It was hardly my fault - if that despicable girl hadn't...

I shook off the thoughts. "It's not just that."

I didn't deny that it was part of the reason, because that would be a complete lie. I just had no words for the second half of my reason. How do you say 'I want to stay with her with her because she hates me'? Even without speaking them, the words sounded wrong.

"So what is it? I really don't think there's anything that can justify it, mate, I have to say. I mean, if you know it's hard to stop - you really shouldn't-"

"I know!" I suddenly said. I heard my voice echoing, but we both knew that the two humans upstairs were still sleeping soundlessly. I lowered my voice before I spoke again, and it sounded completely defeated; just as Alethea's had before. "I know - I just can't..."

"Think," he told me softly. "Why?"

He didn't badger me with questions and lectures like Damien would have, he just wanted me to know what I was doing. I knew why, I just didn't think I could say it aloud.

"She's just so different," I said, shaking my head at the absurdity of it all. "I don't know what it is - she's just different."

"She's not afraid of you."

"Oh, you'd be surprised," I muttered bitterly. I didn't know why I hated that it was true. The accusing memories of her terrified expression hit me once again and I felt the disgust on my face.

"I'm not sure that I would," he said. "I've been there. I just mean, she isn't so out of her mind to finally be

with you - she's managed to keep her thoughts clear and can keep anything going."

"How would you know?" I asked, irritated that he could see the things I'd already overlooked. "You barely even looked at her."

"Maybe," he shrugged. "But I looked enough."

I looked through the air that had previously been just a window. The flimsy material hadn't even lasted a second under my fist. My thoughts trailed upstairs. I wanted so badly to be up there. She need never even know.

"Don't do it mate," Amos whispered. I was so convinced at times that he could read my mind, although he claimed he just knew me so well it was easy. "Keepers are just..."

"I know." I shuddered. Yes, keepers were just horrible; but the idea was so tempting. But that would mean the look of terror was always etched on her glorious features. Keepers chose one human, and just kept them in darkness, drinking from them

every day. They were the worst of our kind; and saw no remorse at it.

"Do you like her?" he asked after a hushed moment. I looked at him for a moment. "I mean more than the blood."

I shook my head, but found myself avoiding eye contact for some strange reason. "She's just another girl."

"You sure about that?" he asked. "Positive?"

My eyes hit his with confusion swirling in them. "She's no different from anyone else."

"She is," he reminded me.

"Possibly," I amended. "But not like that."

Out eyes skidded upwards as the first sounds of someone arousing came to us. It didn't even take me a thought to know who it was, and that it wasn't my girl. I saw the well-concealed longing in Amos' eyes when they fell back to me.

"Go on," I told him.

He stood cautiously. "You gonna be ok?"

"Yeah," I replied. My own eyes rose to the ceiling and he left.

Alethea

I didn't want to open my eyes. I just wanted the blackness before me to hold me back for a little longer. I knew that I had nothing to wake up to, so staying in this form of nothing wasn't exactly a bad thing. Unfortunately, my mind and my body had other ideas, and my dreary, reluctant eyes fluttered open just a few long seconds after I realised how strongly I didn't want it to happen.

At first, the only thing I could see was a patterned ceiling. My surroundings were drowned in a soft glow, not a beam of daylight daring to enter the dark-encrusted room. The twinge of confusion in my mind didn't last longer than a thought, my memory immediately pulling the images to my attention. But how had I ended up asleep? Again?

The mattress under me was stiff, and whilst I couldn't shake off the weariness I felt; I knew nothing serious had happened. I closed my eyes again as I sat up. When I opened them, my suspicions were confirmed

and the warming glow around me was emitting innocently from the lava lamp in the corner of the room. I fixed my gaze upon it for a few moments, watching the coloured blobs bashing soothingly into each other in their slowed journey through the lamp.

The gentle curves of the motion only made me think. Why did this keep happening? I was never even remotely tired, but I kept ending up asleep anyway. Not to mention the fact that I couldn't even recall what had happened right before that. And then I wondered what Kenneth thought of it all. He didn't like me being away from him, but being here and unconscious was hardly much of an improvement.

My hand moved slowly to my throat. The motion was smooth, but I didn't mean it to happen; it was almost as though there was a magnetic pull bringing my hand to my neck. There was no mark or bump or irritation to cause the touch, and the way that it moved without a thought made me weary.

A movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I turned where I was sat, my hand retreating to the bed surface before I saw him. I

couldn't explain why my tension was intensified at the sight of him; but his sapphire eyes only touched mine for a moment before they leapt away.

"Are you ready to go home?"

My eyes skated to my watch, but I didn't think it could be right. How could it be that late? I remembered quickly that he didn't like not receiving any answers, but when I spoke my tone was far away.

"Yeah," I told him, but neither of us made any movement. I glanced at him and his eyes were focused on my hand, tracing lightly around my neck. I slowly moved it away, still not able to understand the incentive behind the gesture. I didn't feel comfortable with my eyes on him and looked away. What was it about him?

He straightened up from his slumped position against the wall. I wasn't looking at him but I couldn't explain why. My hand was over my hurried heart, but I could find any reason for either of these details.

"Come on then," came his voice.

I nodded and stood, enclosed in my own confused thoughts. I wasn't conscious of the way that my eyes routinely avoided him, and the way my movements were hesitant and distracted for the whole trip back.

Alethea

"Al, can I leave you with Charlie for a few minutes? I need to pop up to the office," Dad said hurriedly when I (and my unwanted accessory) arrived home from school the next day.

"Uh, yeah Dad," I replied, only hearing my mind's protest of Kenneth after the words were out of my mouth. I didn't look at him.

"Great, he's sleeping at the mo, so you should be ok."

He didn't even have a second to spare Kenneth his customary warning glance before he was out the door. I heard the car pull quickly out of the drive and we just stood in silence for a moment.

"I wonder what that was about," I said vaguely. Kenneth didn't hear my comment because his eyes were aimed towards the ground. Diana had crept out of the kitchen and was curling herself around my

legs affectionately. I bent down and stroke her from head to tail.

She was looking past me, but I was already accustomed to the way I was ignored when both of them were in the room together. I picked her up and she didn't protest. When I took her into the kitchen she rolled in my arms and leapt to the floor.

"What the matter Di?" I asked as she trotted over to her empty food dish. "Has Dad been ignoring you?"

I picked up the dish and sort her out a meal, but the silence behind me gave me shivers. I wasn't too keen on turning my back on them, but there wasn't really a way to avoid it. I put the dish down again, but Diana made no move towards it, she was too busy attempting to stare down our guest. I folded my arms across my chest and sighed after a moment. Kenneth snapped out of it for a moment and looked shocked at my expression.

"What?" he asked. I gestured him through to the lounge and he raised an eyebrow. It took a moment, but my stare was more effective than my cat's, so he wondered through. I followed and closed the door,

hoping Diana would feel more at ease that way. He still looked confused.

"This may come as a shock to you," I told him. "But my cat has better things to do than combat your stares all day."

He scoffed. "Yeah, sure seemed like it."

I shook my head but grabbed my bag from the corridor and headed upstairs. He didn't follow, and when I got to my room I pulled out my phone from the desk draw and flipped it up to call Miranda. Then I tried again. And again. I got no answer and I sighed on the fifth try.

I wasn't sure why I was calling her, but after the way she'd been at school, I had to check she was ok. I wasn't even sure what it had been, she wasn't upset (or visibly upset anyway) but she wasn't herself. I knew I couldn't expect her to be, but something seemed really wrong. I dialled a different number, and when I got an answer my question burst from my lips.

"Brad, is Miranda ok?" I asked. I noticed that I sounded slightly weary.

"Yeah," he said, slightly hesitant. "She's fine."

I exhaled in relief. "Thank god. I've tried calling her-"

"Listen, it's really not a good time," Brad said urgently. "I really don't think-" I heard Miranda's faint voice at the end of the line.

"Who is it?"

I expected Brad to answer. I knew she felt terrible, but Kenneth was going to move on; and she knew that. She was kidding herself in the same way me and Brad had been kidding ourselves to hope he wouldn't. He didn't say anything.

Apparently, she realised it was me. There was a slight scuffle as she snatched the phone off of Brad, and then she was shrieking down the line to me. "HOW DARE YOU EVEN TRY TO-"

I dropped the phone in alarm and it snapped shut. There was a few seconds where the only sound was my breathing before I picked it up again. I flipped it

open, and, just as I had suspected, it had hung up. Even someone as unpractised with fights as me knew that hanging up during the middle of a rant would only infuriate the person you were trying to make amends with.

Just before I closed it again, it beeped and my credit flashed at me. It snapped shut and then I looked back at it, an afterimage of the numbers on screen replaying in my mind. That was lower than I left it. Before I realised what I was doing, my fingers were navigating to the outbox.

When the last five messages my phone had sent flashed up on screen, my chest tightened and my breathing halted for a moment. It became rapid and hurried as I tried to understand what I was seeing. There was one explanation.

I suddenly had to remember that my three year old brother was asleep next door. If it wasn't for that, my voice would be tearing through the walls right now.

Kenneth

"Kenneth," said a low, strained voice from behind me. Even without turning I knew that Alethea was controlling her voice to the point of reason. I felt like I was missing something vital; people only used that tone when furious - I had heard it echoed many times in my own voice.

She didn't speak again, although I was conscious of the stress around her. Her heart was pounding loudly but slowly. Whilst I knew that at any other point I would have stood my ground and waited for her to come to me; I turned. I was running out of patience with this girl and didn't have time to wait on her stubbornness.

"Ah," I said lamely when my eyes saw the small phone held tightly in her clenched fist. I suddenly recalled neglecting to delete the messages I had had to send. She was furious.

She dropped the phone onto the empty sofa, her eyes not leaving mine. I couldn't say I was worried by this. Yes, it was a little uncomfortable, but I could imagine worse. I sighed and she gaped at me. If there was any way to avoid this, I would.

"Is that all you can say?" she asked.

"You know, technically, I didn't say anything," I commented.

She shook her head. "Then do you have anything to say?"

I pretended to think about it for a minute. "Nothing particularly interesting," I shrugged.

"Kenneth!"

I looked away, but she didn't continue. When I looked back, she still had the same angry expression set in place.

"Oh come on," I reasoned. "It was for your own good."

She scoffed. "How do you arrive at that conclusion?"

I wanted to tell her, but I knew she wouldn't appreciate the answer. It wasn't as if I was doing anything terrible - I was only freeing her of distractions; I'd seen the way she'd acted before, these messages only stopped any reason for her to feel that way. They'd be horrible to her, she'd be

horrible to them; and everyone would think the other person started it. It wasn't exactly unusual.

"Miranda's furious Kenneth! How could you do that?"

"Well, she wasn't exactly the ideal friend, was she?" I countered uselessly. "Personally, I think you're better off without her."

"Well you would say that," she almost shouted. "You had her and passed her up - you'd say the same about any of the other girls you've been with since you arrived!"

I shrugged. No-one was perfect.

"Do you even know how much that would have hurt her?" she asked me. "Do you know remember what you told her?"

"'I don't need people like you,'" I quoted.

My memory didn't help the situation. "How could you even think that - of course I need her! And now she hates me."

"You're better off without her," I repeated. "Besides - she did the same thing to you."

"Right, because you would know," she said. Understanding hit here expression and there was a moment before she spoke. "Did you do that?"

"No," I replied honestly. She didn't believe me. "Knowing you, you aren't going to like this, but I actually didn't have to send it."

"But I bet you told her to do it."

"That's always possible," I admitted, digging a hole for myself. "But she really didn't seem bothered about it - when I say you're better off, I really do mean it."

She looked away, because, despite what she wanted to think, she knew I was right; if about nothing but the first part - but before that she'd gotten something else through to me. Now I had another of her expressions that I didn't want to see locked in my mind. Sat right beside the one of terror was her fury.

I could almost feel the tension leaking away from her, and that just left the room empty.

Alethea

After I'd snatched my phone up and shoved it back into my bedroom drawer - making sure it was completely covered and therefore silent - I just sank onto the bed. It didn't surprise me to see Kenneth stood in the doorway. If it wasn't for the fact that I felt so dreadful, I would be annoyed that he liked that I felt so dreadful.

"What?" I asked, reacting to his expression.

"I was just thinking..."

I waited, but had to resist rolling my eyes when he didn't continue. "About what?"

"This is the first time that I've seen you two days in a row."

"That's not strictly true," I told him, although I knew what he meant. He just shrugged my comment away, although his eyes didn't move from mine. I had to turn away after a moment, still uneasy. I wished I knew why I was uneasy. All I knew at the moment was that the feeling wouldn't leave me.

"Even so..." he trailed off. I couldn't see where this was leading. "What would you tell me if I said..."

I knew I should probably ask what he was going to say; but I wasn't sure I wanted to know. Even part of me was telling me exactly that, but I didn't know why. It was just a conversation.

Kenneth

I wasn't sure how it happened. One second I was beside the door, but as soon as I remembered the glowing beauty of her blood I could taste it, and as soon as that happened, I was hypnotised by the idea. I moved so fast that she couldn't possibly have seen, and drank so quickly she was unconscious before she could realise that either.

I didn't want to stop, but I did. I had known it was coming, so I could stop; it was easier than it had been. When I did stop, I stepped back. Amos' words were echoing in my mind. He was right and I knew it - it would be better for me to just stay away from her. I just couldn't do it.

The strange thing was, not only did I know I couldn't just stay away from her; I couldn't quite bring myself to want to. Sure, if I had to I probably wouldn't be devastated by it; but it wasn't the same as it had been

with anyone else. With them, every extra day just seemed bland and dull; but with Alethea...

I shook my head, and as the air rushed past them, my thoughts dissolved. I didn't want this to happen. Usually, humans changed so much that they just became ridiculously featureless and simply couldn't hold my attention. It seemed so predictable that the girl who annoyed the hell out of me was the one I didn't want to leave. I supposed they'd all have done that though, if I'd stayed longer - and I knew that even if they had, I couldn't have stayed with them anyway. What was it about her?

I just watched her. Most of the time, I would find some way to entertain myself, or I'd leave before they awoke, but Alethea almost held a pull for me. I just didn't see the point in going when I didn't need to.

My thoughts seemed slowed as I watched her. I was partially conscious of the speed at which time was passing, but I couldn't pull words into my mind any faster. There was so many things I could be doing, and so many things going on in this time; but all of it seemed like nothing more than an idea. If it wasn't in

my sight, it wasn't real; and it the state I was in, the only thing in my sight was Alethea. Surprisingly, just to have her real was enough for me.

I almost laughed as I realised how different this was from when she was awake. When she was asleep, she was just so peaceful, and I couldn't find a flaw in her tranquil features. When she was awake however, I wasn't sure how often it slipped into the exact opposite.

Anything could be happening outside of this room, and I couldn't even care. Inside, I felt almost ecstatic now that I remembered what I had achieved in the last few hours alone. I had proved to myself that I could stop drinking her blood. I had halted the delicate and compelling urge to continue, and it hadn't been as painful as I had thought.

Eventually, I heard the sounds of an arrival downstairs. One glance at the clock told me that was my cue to leave, especially as the groan of the car's engine told me it was her father who'd arrived. Needless to say, he wouldn't be pleased with me just staying here. With one more glance at her calm

expression, I turned away. I darted down the stairs and slipped out of the back door before her father even reached the door.

My eye lingered on her upstairs window for half a second before I sprinted away. Even then I couldn't shake the feeling that where I really wanted to be was back in that small room, whether or not she knew I was there.

Alethea

My lips turned down and I was aware of the cool air circling above me. I easily recognised the comforting texture of the blanket below me as mine; and, ignoring the sudden feeling of loss and the sounds of the front door downstairs, I kept my eyes shut and let sleep claim me again.

My hand moved slowly to my neck just before I went under. I felt two fresh gashes there, both small and sharp. The mystery of those mark encircled my dreams from that point on.

Lucy

Oh. God. My heart was racing, my palms were sweaty and my mind was spinning out of control. I now understood my mother's claims that the worst thing you can do to a child is leave them in the same place for their whole life. Ok, technically, I doubt if fifteen years constitutes as a 'whole life', but the whole moving thing was way more difficult for me than it should be.

My mum couldn't even do the same as Amber's parents and move to somewhere that was close enough to our old house that I could attend the same school - she had to move half way across the country. 'I can't stand being in this house,' she'd said. 'I hate to think what it will do to me if I stay here - a change in scenery is the only option, I'm sorry Luce.'

You want a change in scenery? Go buy a landscape from the local painter! Oh, wait a minute, the local paint just so happens to have moved abroad in the last month, and also - by complete coincidence - is my dad. I didn't even know what their feud was about, I was just told - either move five hundred miles, or move over the ocean. What kind of a choice is that, I

ask you? So basically, my parents decided to get a divorce, and seeing as I couldn't fly back and forth between England and America every week, I was stuck in one country or the other. Being the total idiot I am, I chose to stay with Mum in England.

My mum, the lawyer who's never home; as opposed to my dad who works his own hours. Maybe it was because Mum flashed her credit card at me while dad was packing and leaving. That just made me seem so shallow, which I really wasn't. He walked out first, I reminded myself. He didn't care where you went when he vanished from your life for two weeks - it was only when I was 'all or nothing' that he even looked at me.

But I would still visit. How could I not? He was my Dad and I loved him, and I'm hopeless at holding grudges. He's the guy who baked me cakes when I was sad, helped me study when I was stuck, painted me everything I asked for, not matter what his other deadlines. He taught me everything from how to work the paintbrush to how to ride a bike. We'd been closer than ever right before my parents' row. He

was just too caught up to notice me when mum was out being a flirt.

My mum was a cow, and we all knew it. I couldn't understand how dad had ever ended up with her to be honest. People imagine that lawyers are all about work and money and suits and briefcases. Mum was more about the guys, the social options, the shouting, the pay and the 'celebratory parties'.

Ok, I sighed to myself. I did know why I was here. I was here because of my Dad. Even if my mum thought she could bribe me with clothes and makeup and jewellery; she was completely wrong. I hated bribery and almost despised myself for letting her think it worked. The fact that she didn't know me well enough to realise that I hated those things only made matters worse. I preferred books and paints and notebooks and writer's things.

I was here because Dad told me to be. He'd told me that to move to America was stupid, because even if he could find somewhere suitable to live on his low salary, he'd never be able to pay for me to keep contact with my friends. He didn't know how things

would turn out, and didn't want to subject me to some of the possible outcomes. He told me to play sensible and go with mum, for him. So, of course, I did.

He'd also promised me that he'd take me over there to stay as soon as he thought he could. As soon as he had a secure home and income in other words. I'd be allowed visits, but I knew I could never ask him to pay for it, and Mum wasn't going to be too pleased, so my money was going straight towards that trip.

I didn't care where we lived. I didn't care what we could and couldn't afford. Heck, I just wanted to be with him. But he wanted me here, so here I was.

I looked at the towering school before me and hoped that the kids I saw sprinting restlessly around weren't like that all day. I had told myself that when I moved here, I would reinvent myself. My mum wouldn't notice the difference, and anyone else who I knew wouldn't find out until I'd already done it. I wanted to be confident and able and independent. But here I was, as nervous as ever, almost shaking as

I walked up the front steps and turned towards the Head's office.

I really wished I'd gone to America.

Alethea

"Uh, Miss? I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"You'll do as you're told, Miss Day, and show our new student perfect courtesy and manners as you do so."

"Yes Miss," I mumbled.

Typical. Kenneth hated any other kind of attention, and now I was practically going to be stuck to Lucy for the day. It wasn't that I didn't want to be with her - it was just that I knew what Kenneth's reaction would be, and that she'd be better off without it.

One glance at her schedule told me that she was in most of my classes as well, which did absolutely nothing to help me. I tried my best for a good first impression, but I don't know how it turned out. She seemed a little shy, so I wasn't sure my constant distraction would help anything.

Everything ran smoothly. Break was a little awkward, because I was constantly glancing around, expecting Kenneth to catch my eye. Luckily for me - then, at least - I didn't see him.

We had a quick lunch. From what she ate, I would guess her stomach was uneasy about her first day, and seeing as mine was uneasy anyway, we left the canteen quickly. I told myself that the reason I felt better once we were outside was because it was bigger, and therefore there was less chance of him seeing me out here than in the canteen, but I knew it was something else. Pretty soon, the two of us were sat in the shade of the trees, watching most of our year group tossing a ball around. I didn't really see the point in the game, but it was fun to play.

You want to get the ball, it was simple enough. You want it so much that you would tackle other people for it. The game is pretty much every guy for themselves, but there are two loose teams. It's always funny when someone changes team, especially as that person is usually Brad. I could see him from here.

I recognised the shine in Lucy's eyes as she watched them all. I hadn't been outside in ages; even before the Kenneth issue I had taken to being inside with Miranda. Now I was free of that, and I could clearly see what she was thinking.

"Do you want to join in?" I asked her. She looked startled that I'd picked that up about her, but nodded her head nervously. I smiled. "Ok, drop your bag there, and then we can go."

"Are you sure? I mean, I really don't..."

"Yeah, they won't mind," I assured her. "And as for our bags, they're perfectly safe."

She hesitantly put her school bag beside mine and followed me over to the others. Everyone gave her a light smile or a nod of the head when we got there, but I just turned to Mark.

"Toss us the ball."

Brad

"Oh, come on," I said. Miranda just turned away. "Don't be like that. It's just a game."

"A game?" she spat.

"Yes, Miranda, this is just a game - can you honestly blame her for wanting to join in? And she's got Lucy as well-"

"Maybe this is, but what about everything else? Is that just 'a game' to you as well?" Her eyes were flashing when she turned back to me.

"What? Miranda, I really think you're over reacting. You know that she didn't want-"

"Brad, just stop it! Ok? You can't defend her - especially after those messages." I saw the beginnings of tears in her eyes, but she just blinked them away furiously. "After everything - and she still thinks I don't know that - I already knew exactly what she told me, but I thought that maybe - just maybe - having been friends for years would patch over that!"

"Miranda, she didn't really mean-"

"Yes she did, trust me, she did. She would never do that as a joke. She's changed. And not for the better."

Crush or not, that was over the line. "Miranda, you did exactly the same thing, and guess what she did? She looked over it - she ignored it, because she knew you'd changed. And she knew that you couldn't really mean it when you were with him. He brings out the worst in people."

"So now you're comparing me to her? How does that help anything - Brad? It's already clear we're different, if we weren't then Kenneth wouldn't have chosen her over me! She's obviously the better person by far, and I don't need you to remind me of that!"

"That's not true - and you know that's not what I meant. He didn't choose her over you - he changes girls every few weeks for Christ's sake! All the time you were with him, you knew it was coming - you must have!"

"Or else what? Is that just another reason I'm a failure? I bet between the three of you, you lot could come up with a whole list of reasons telling me why I'm such a-"

"What are you talking about? No-one thinks you're a failure-"

"Alethea clearly disagrees with that."

"I highly doubt that, and even if you believe it - you know she won't stay like that after-"

"It doesn't matter if she does or not Brad! She's done it, and she can't take it back now. What's past is past."

"You don't believe that," I told her, finally saying the words I had been thinking for the past week. "If you really thought that, you would have gotten over him by now!"

She turned away and stalked off, and I was left, like a gormless idiot, staring after her. I considered going after her, but having known her long enough to realise she'd be like this for a few hours, I thought better of it. I just turned back, carried on with the game; trying to ignore the screeching in my head that told me she was watching and she needed me. If she thought she needed me there, she could come and get me - if she didn't think she needed me, trying to help her would only make things worse. If she wasn't so

blinkin' dramatic about that disgusting guy in the first place, none of this would have happened.

There was proof that he didn't completely control minds, and that he wasn't all that girls thought he was; I could see it in front of me. Alethea met my eyes and smiled. I didn't even want to think about where he was right now. She still had her mind, and when I saw the spark in her eyes at her innocent smile, I couldn't believe she would have sent those messages. It was all so trivial anyway. Anyone could get a hold on a mobile and text anything. For all Miranda knew, Alethea's phone had been stolen and used.

I did feel for Miranda. I hated that she was going through this, and the guy who did it to her, but to know that Alethea was managing was something. It made me think that maybe, it was partly Miranda's fault this had happened too. Maybe she could have stopped it, if she'd tried. She didn't have to be excited when a well-know heart-breaker met her gaze.

Miranda had changed. She was overly sensitive now; but I had expected that. What I hadn't expected was

that she wouldn't have Alethea to talk to about it all. Girl to girl. That just left me in an awkward position, because I had to deal with one girl and watch out for the other at the same time. But Alethea was holding up; maybe she didn't need my attention.

God I hated that guy.

Miranda had been warming up to me lately. Before, I'd just been a friend, and now, we were edging closer to something more. Caught on the rebound; nice. I wouldn't ever know if I was good enough now; not if I only got her attention when she was desperate for someone - and someone else for that matter. For all I knew, every time her arm linked to mine, she was imagining him all over again.

God I hated him. Someone tossed me the ball, and with all my thoughts of hate to him powering my arm, I lobbed it as far as I could; going for distance and power rather than height. It still went pretty high though; and pretty far. I smiled slightly when it rebound off a tree. The whole thing shook, and it still jetted back a fair way.

I caught sight of Miranda's expression. Even from this distance I recognised it, and just hoped she knew I was sorry. I was still trying to find some way to prove to her that I was good enough as me, and here I was, telling her only things that she didn't want to hear about her ex-best friend, who was now receiving my smile and returning it with one of her own.

Note to self; never tell girls that they're over reacting.

Alethea

Wow that was a good throw.

I was boiling. I knew I would regret wearing this jumper. It was thick and comfortable, and wonderful for winter; it just so happened that today was a hot day, and seeing as it wasn't winter, there was plenty of reason for me to not wear it. However, if I didn't wear it before school, my parents would ask abut the bruises on my arms, and if I didn't wear it at school...Well, aside from Lucy, no-one would ask, because I had no doubt that they would all have heard about my scene with Kenneth the other day - and could probably guess that there was more that

they didn't know about. Surprisingly though, I wasn't to keen on relaying my current situation to her. Even if it felt slightly deceitful, I wanted to at least be able to pretend that someone still liked me, even with Kenneth trying to prise me away from them all.

I motioned Lucy over. She was flushed and beaming. "I'm just going to go grab a drink, ok?"

"I might do the same actually," she said. Her face fell when she turned back and her eyes scanned the ground again.

"Relax, your bag is there," I told her, nodding to the base of a nearby tree. "Someone must have moved it to keep it out of the way. Mine on the other hand..."

I knew where mine was; I could see it. I could also see the sapphire pair of eyes that stayed on mine as I spoke. I glanced at her and see was watching me wearily, I had to look away, and was already heading away as I spoke.

"I'll be back in a minute."

Kenneth's eyes stayed on mine as I went over, and mine stayed on his. I didn't say anything, only

grabbing my bottle from my bag when I reached him and taking a swig of water. That was so refreshing I couldn't put it into words. I put it back with a slight smile and turned away.

His strong hand locked over my arm, and my body stopped automatically. This was the opposite arm to the one he'd held at my house the other day, and that was good to begin with; but it meant that later, both of them would be hurting. My throat tied for half a second, but I ignored the worry that was spreading through me. I didn't even know why I felt so shaken around him, so I decided not to give it another thought. Whatever it was would sort itself out soon enough.

Kenneth

"Could you let go of me?" she asked.

"I could," I admitted.

"But you won't," she guessed. I shook my head once and she looked away stubbornly.

"I'm not going to let you go so that you can just run off again," I informed her easily.

"I don't know what you mean," she replied, not looking at me.

"So you've already forgotten last Wednesday?" She shook her head and we were silent for a moment.

"You would catch me if I tried," she pointed out.

"True, but why waste the effort?"

She didn't bother to reply. At times, her stubborn tendencies were almost humorous. Although, she never knew when to stop, and usually went too far.

"Kenneth, I have to go."

"No you don't."

"Yes, I do," she insisted. She kept her expression plain, so I wasn't sure what was playing behind the words. "I'm meant to be looking after the new girl for the day. And before you say anything, I told Miss Brookes it was a bad idea and she completely ignored me."

"Of course."

"It's not my fault if you choose not to believe it," she decided.

"It didn't exactly look like you were opposed to it," I informed her.

"Just because it's a bad idea didn't mean I didn't enjoy it," she answered. "Do not get annoyed by that."

"I don't know what you mean," I mimicked, although my use of the phrase was truthful.

She scoffed. "Yes, you do."

Her eyes lingered on Mrs Cole as she turned away from us. I smiled and I knew Alethea saw it. I knew I could so almost anything here. She sighed heavily.

"At least let me go and tell Brad to help her," she said.

"Why Brad?" I asked. She raised an eyebrow at my tone and I rolled my eyes at her reaction. "Don't you have some other friends you can load this girl off to?"

"Not anymore," she whispered, looking away again. She raised her voice when she continued. "And Lucy is a person not just this girl."

"Whatever," I said. "She can sort herself out."

"Actually Kenneth," Alethea told me, turning back. "As surprising as this is - she doesn't know where

everything is yet, she doesn't know many other people at this school, and she doesn't know that I've got some possessive guy I'm supposed to answer to all day and night."

"Maybe you should enlighten her."

"Why waste my breath?" she asked. "Miranda's in her next class - not Brad, and I'm sure she'll waste no time before she tells Lucy what an unreliable and horrible person I am. The only reason I'm not asking her to take care of Lucy for the day is that she won't let me get close enough to her to say it."

"I told you you're better off without her."

"Thanks so much - but she wouldn't even be like that if it wasn't for you - so I really don't think you can say much on the subject."

I paused. "What do you mean by that?"

She just shook her head, leaving it so that she was facing away from me again. I gave her a minute but she still didn't say anything.

"Alethea..."

She didn't move. Even with the screams and shouts of the playground behind me I knew I would be able to hear even her faintest whisper - but she said nothing. Her expression changed.

"Kenneth," her voice was annoyed.

"What now?"

She jerked away from me; or she tried to. Her eyes met mine for a second, and I let my hand drop. Her replaced it, but with a much lighter touch. She just shook her head slowly, comprehending; and I rolled my eyes.

"What's the matter now?" I inquired.

The look on her face said it was obvious, but she answered anyway. "I do have to use this arm you know!"

I glanced down. Oops. Oh well - humans heal. It wasn't that bad anyway. "You still-"

"I know I haven't answered the question," she snapped. I waited and got no reply. She was busy massaging her arm through the thick sleeve of the

black jumper. I glanced up at the sun, wondering how she could be wearing something like that on a day like today.

Miranda

I still couldn't stop my eyes from searching for him at every available opportunity. Part of my mind tried to tell me I setting myself up for another let down; but it was the meek part that rarely got any attention. Maybe that was where I went wrong...

When I saw them, she wasn't looking at him. How much I hated her...I wanted to be there, to be able to see him without looking like a desperate ex or a gossiping idiot - and she just refused to see him. I wasn't the only one; every other girl in the school wanted the same thing - and she had it and hated it. She hated him...and he didn't care.

The bell rang and I turned away. Next period I had media; and I knew from past lessons that that didn't hold enough of an interest for me to distract me from these thoughts.

I trudged slowly and reluctantly to class, but still end up being one of the first ones in. There was only nine people in this class, so it didn't surprise me much; especially as I knew at least three of them would have snuck out of school for the break for a cigarette and wouldn't be back for another fifteen minutes.

I started to get my things out, and didn't notice as the room populated around me. It was only after I spared a glance at the board and saw we were watching something to analyse today that I realised why no-one else had anything out. I pushed my stuff off of the desk and back into my bag.

Miss G started fiddling with her laptop, trying to get the DVD to play. She could do media; analyse it, make it, write it, mark it; she just didn't do technology. That gave me a free lesson to dwell on my disturbing thoughts.

Just before the lights clicked out the door opened. My eyes flicked routinely in that direction, and didn't leave the brown pair connected to mine. Her own eyes jumped away quickly and she pointed the new girl inside, mentioning me as she did so. Alethea

pulled the door shut and dashed down the corridor. The girl came to sit beside me. How was Alethea juggling the unavoidable heartthrob of the school and the new model student at the same time? Did the girl next to me even know about him?

This could get interesting.

Alethea

In the end I hadn't had to tell Kenneth why I thought it was his fault. I took Lucy to class and then sprinted to geography, skidding into my seat half a second before the second bell went. Mrs Grooves shot me an evil look, although she couldn't punish me for being late. Knowing her, she'd already done the register and sent it - and now that she had to call it back again she only thought I was trouble. I had more important things to worry about the foreign deforestation at the moment. For instance, I still wanted some kind of reason for the throbbing discomfort I felt when I was near Kenneth; the one that was way too large for just what I knew about him.

Kenneth

When the bell rang, I was already beside her locker. It didn't hurt to be a little early, and besides, I knew she'd be out quickly - her classroom was just down the corridor. I fixed my gaze on the floor, still pondering her words from earlier.

I looked up at the sound of her laugh. Even if it was only to my ears, I knew it sounded forced; just slightly. She deliberately didn't look at me as she escorted another girl through the crowd. She flashed me a look that said 'wait'. Usually, I wouldn't do that; but right now, I simply couldn't be bothered to intervene. Her glance had also told me she'd be here in a minute or so, so I wasn't worried.

Sure enough, a minute or so later, she turned towards me, having sent the new girl off with someone else. At least she was learning, even if it was slow. I smile when she reached me.

"Alethea," I said, in out customary greeting. Her eyes held daggers when they looked to me this time, but it didn't phase me.

She didn't reply, but I let it slide.

Lucy

I couldn't quite believe it; I'd made it through my first day. I almost laughed at how relieved the thought sounded - most people managed to get through the day without any catastrophes, it shouldn't be much of an accomplishment.

I put a few of my new books into my locker as people bustled past me. Having a locker beside the front door meant that it was quick to get to, but also meant that everyone had to get past on their way out, so I had a year of getting in everybody's way to look forward to. A few of them smiled politely at me, but most were in too much of a rush to pay me any attention.

It was only when I closed my locker that my balance gave; and after a particularly harsh shove from a group of hurried guy, I tumbled quickly to the ground. My breath escaped quickly when I hit the ground, and I was slightly dazed.

"Guys!" said one guy irritably. They were most past now, but the few I could see glanced back. They looked sorry, but stuck as a group and moved on. I

glanced up at the one guy who had remained behind. I recognised him from the group we'd been with at lunch. He was the really strong thrower.

If I'd had any breath left after my fall it was gone now. My perception of good-looking probably wasn't the same as everyone else's, but I had a Dad who'd taught me more about beauty than most girls knew. And this guy was dazzling.

His dirty blonde hair was messy and wild, pulling seamlessly up to the top of his round, caring face in such subtle waves it looked nothing short of perfect. His eyes were framed by thick lashes that blinked once as he looked down at me. His skin was tinted and slightly darker than my own, and the ripping muscles he had caused his broad shoulders no problem. I stopped breathing for a moment.

"Are you ok?" he asked. His earthy eyes looked concerned when I didn't answer, but I was lost in the texture of his voice. I was amazed that my heart-beat managed to stay steady. "Lucy? Are you alright?"

"I, uh, yeah," I said hurriedly, looking down. I offered his hand to help me up, but I ignored it, embarrassed enough as it was.

He shook his head after the other guys, who were just leaving through the front gate. "Sometime they are so obnoxious. Was it Kyle who pushed you?"

"I really have no idea," I told him. It was all rather disorientating; but even if I had known I doubted whether I would have been able to give him a straight answer.

"So, anyway," he said, switching his gaze back to me. "That was the football team, in all their glory. That probably means you'll be plastered with apologies tomorrow."

"Really?" I asked, suddenly cautious. My shyness broke through my stunned state and I was nervous. He chuckled, and it sounded heavenly.

"Not one for attention?"

"Not really," I told him. Now I was anticipating it, it was bound to be a whole lot worse. My eye lingered on his jacket, identical to the one the rest of the

football team had been wearing. He saw and smiled wearily.

"Sometimes being team captin is more about controlling them then training them. They do play a good game though."

Oh my freaking gosh. Gorgeous and football? And from the sports policy at this school, that meant his grades must be good too. And he was kind enough to stop and help the new girl rather than carry on with the rest of his mates.

Brad

Her bright blue eyes flicked past me for a moment, but seemed reluctant to stay away for long. I was reluctant for them to be gone as well. Her auburn hair was waist length, and slightly ruffled from her fall. I wanted to reach out and tuck a few loose strands back, but I kept my arm at my side. She did it herself after a moment, relieving me of the need.

"Hey, Lucy!" Miranda said enthusiastically, coming up behind me. She glanced around theatrically. "Where Alethea?"

"She had to go," Lucy told her. I didn't have to look at Miranda to sense the expression forming on her face. I already knew what she was planning.

"Oh really? That's odd, because-"

"Miranda," I interrupted, my voice surprisingly cold. "Don't."

"Don't what pumpkin?" I didn't look at her, and I felt my body stiffen as she wove her arm around mine. I let it stay for a minute, but moved slightly, stepping out of her reach. I was sorry about earlier, but she'd didn't need to go and ruin things for Alethea, or for Lucy. And I wanted to know I was good enough without an audience.

Lucy looked slightly confused, but left it. She trusted my caution more than Miranda's smug expression, and that was something I was thankful for.

"I'll see you later," she said. "Er..."

"Brad," I told her. She smiled, and I couldn't help but mirror it. She turned away, but then froze for a moment. I knew what caught her attention, and my eyes narrowed instantly. She looked at him for a few

seconds before turning away, shocking all four of us who were watching her, although she saw nothing strange about it. I prayed that it stayed that way.

God I hated that guy. And if he didn't get rid of that glint in his eyes soon, he was going to find out just how much I meant that statement.

Kenneth

That was odd. But good. I really wasn't in the mood for another lengthy audience anyway. I supposed that probably meant she'd be staring tomorrow, but there wasn't much I could do about that; I'd just have to try and ignore it.

Alethea sighed and I looked at her, ripping my gaze from where the new girl had just disappeared. What was it with these people? Were they on a mission to prove they were different or something? No-one's ever just turned away before. Oh well, that only made my life easier.

"Can you not let me think one person might still accept me after this? Do you have to ruin that too?"

Alethea asked me quietly. She didn't need the volume to tell me that she was annoyed.

"What are you talking about?" I sighed. I hated it when people spoke in riddles. She was the one who'd been avoiding me all day, and now she was accusing me of something I didn't ruin. Purposely.

"I saw the way you looked at her - if you touch Lucy, I swear to you I-"

I scoffed, not giving it a second thought. "What would you do about it? What could you do about it?"

"Promise me you won't," she said.

"Won't what?" I asked. I had planned to be a bit angrier that she'd scavenged a day away from me, but seeing as she was prepared for a fight, I decided I may as well play it out.

She kept her eyes on mine, which was strange; for her. "You won't do anything to her."

"I don't know what you mean," I told her, looking uncaringly away. I wasn't planning anything anyway; half of the reason for that stare was the boy stood

beside her. I loved the way the whole school's male population got so easily jealous. "And besides, I don't do promises."

"I suppose you never need to," she commented sourly. My eyes slid over to hers, but she was avoiding mine. "Commitments aren't exactly something you stay with, are they?"

"Ok, now I really don't know what you mean."

"I know that."

I didn't ask about her statement.

Chapter 3

Blood Stained Ruby Part 3

A Way Of Understanding

Alethea

I snatched the phone from the side, expecting Mum to be calling to say she'd be late again. I didn't know where Dad and Charlie were, although, judging from the state of the kitchen cupboards; my guess would be the supermarket.

"Hello?"

"Hey stranger - I haven't heard your voice in ages!"

That was a shock. "Oh my god - Kate?"

"The one and only." I could imagine her doing her signature spin as she said it; and the thought made me smile. "What been up with you lately? I just had a ton of exams. I have a bet with Gina that I failed half off them."

"What her side of the bet?" I asked curiously. My cousin would never have a straightforward bet, there must be some joke or twist involved.

"She recons I've failed all of them."

I laughed; how could I not? "What a supportive friend you have. What about the others - what do they think?"

"Ok, are you ready for this?" There was silence for a second, and then her active tone sped up as she ran through everyone. I didn't know all of her friends by name, but I could remember a few.

"Jel says I've passed them all with top grades - but she's like amazing at school, so everyone's betting that she has the highest marks - Kelli is convinced that I've passed them all, but that she's totally mucked all of hers up, so we told her not to be so

dramatic - she started going on about how they would condemn her to a future in a rundown flat with no heating or electricity, can you believe that?"

"From Kelli, I can," I told her. She considered that for a second, but didn't wait long.

"Harry told me his aim is to get Ds in everything, but he's convinced he had Es, which he really annoyed about. Kyle on the other hand, needs straight Bs or else his mum stops his pocket money-"

"Don't you and you're mum have a similar arrangement?"

She paused. "Well...there's loopholes in everything...normally..."

"And if anyone can find one, it's you," I promised her.

"You know it's true!"

I just laughed. "So, what are you all betting? Where's the risk this time?"

"Loser - or losers, depending on everyone's marks - pay for the movies for everyone for three weeks. We only go once a week."

"But there's ten of you."

"Everyone agreed. And usually we change it anyway, so they only have to share something sugary around everyone."

"Did that happen today?"

"Yup."

"I thought you seemed worse than usual."

"Worse? I'm very offended by that comment Althea Day!" I heard her runs of laughter echoing down the phone. It stopped abruptly. "Do you remember Rick? Richards?"

"You mean cute Rick? Of course I remember him," I told her. My cheeks burned at the thoughts; most of them being evolved forms of daydreams. Her voice was excited, and my emotions were usually identical to hers when we were together. Or talking. Or texting.

"He was asking about you the other day."

"Really? Oh my god."

"Yep."

"What was he asking? What did you tell him? Do you know why? I'm dying here - give me some answers!"

"Slow down - I need a space to put the answers in!"

I was silent.

"Ok, so he was just asking-"

My eyes refocused and saw the kitchen reflection in the mirror as opposed to the calming garden I had been observing a second earlier. One detail my hyper eyes failed to miss was the guy beside the door. I realised with a pang that he would have heard the whole conversation. Considering how much he hated any other contact, I was extremely glad Kate lived in London.

"Listen K, I have to go."

"What, now? But-"

"Sorry Kate."

"Call me later?" she asked. I wanted to say yes.

Then I hung up, well aware of the watching eyes that were concentrating on me. I put the phone back, face

down, upon the counter, but kept my gaze out of the window. I didn't turn.

"Who's Rick?"

I shrugged. "I don't know who you mean."

"How about 'cute Rick'? Do you recognise that name?"

My eyes switched to the patterned counter I was leaning on. "It rings a bell. I suppose."

He didn't say anything; just leaving me to mutter absently to myself. I guess I was just proving to him what he already knew; that when I told him I didn't know, usually, it was completely the opposite. He used the pause to pull his jumper off. We must have looked like a right pair today, both of us in thick school jumpers when most of the population weren't.

I turned back, but only because it was uncomfortable this way. As soon as I turned my suspicions were confirmed and I knew it wasn't much better this way. He didn't look impressed.

"Just to save you the hassle," I began as he opened his mouth to speak; presumably to tell me off about something or other. "Rick is a friend of my cousin's who I met last year when we went to visit them."

He didn't look as if he believed me, but I really didn't care. Yes, Rick was cute. He had brown hair that was so dark it was nearly black, and holly-green eyes that were almost impossible to look away from. He was really strong, and had the build of an athlete; which helped when he played his numerous sports. His soft grin always made me smile, and last time I had seen him, he still had some of that 'little boy' innocence around his features. He was adoringly shy, to top it all off.

Now that I was visualising another guy as well, I really saw what Kenneth looked like. I already knew the deep sapphire shade that his eyes held, but was almost shocked that there wasn't a hint of annoyance there in this second. I knew that was bad. I was so accustomed to having him annoyed with me that I didn't really see him normally.

I noticed for the first time that the brown shade of his hair actually changed. It was odd that I hadn't seen it before. Towards the untamed tips of each strand, the colour got gradually lighter. Remembering him at lunch today, I also realised that his hair looked best in daylight. The mid-brown now deepened to a glorious shade under the sun's eye.

The tan on his skin looked so natural that it seemed impossible to see him without it. His facial features were strong and defined; thin, ignorable lashes encasing the gorgeous eyes that were watching mine.

I knew how strong he was. In fact, I expected that he was stronger than I knew. That only drew my eyes to his muscles and I saw for the first time how definite they were. Strong, defiant and independent; and awfully threatening when he wanted them to be.

"Alethea?"

My eyes jumped back up to his face and I couldn't quite read his expression. It wasn't that it was that way purposefully, it was just that I didn't understand the emotions playing there. I took a moment, but a light blush bloomed on my cheeks when I realised I'd

been staring, and complimenting; which was exactly the opposite of what I wanted to do. I just couldn't find anything wrong with the way he looked, so the only thing available was compliments.

"Something wrong?" he inquired; and I recalled, needlessly, exactly how inviting his voice could be. I was captivated for a moment, but the blush only deepened, and when I spoke my words hurried.

"Uh, no, er, everything's-" My eyes hit his and my tone reverted to normal. I swallowed as the words stumbled. "Fine."

He smiled slightly, a little pleasantly confused by my actions. He looked different. When his lips pulled up at the corners, it was softer than usual. It also stopped faster than usual too, and that meant I didn't see it for long. I couldn't help my eyes skating up and down his body again.

"What?" he asked when I frowned. I shook my head, considering. "What?" he repeated. He didn't sound annoyed like he normally would, he was almost amused.

"That shouldn't be healed yet." I nodded to his arm which, only two days ago had had a gash straight down it. He looked at it for a moment as well. My guess would be that that was why he'd worn the jumper; either to keep from me that it had healed, or to keep from everyone else that it hadn't. Obviously, the first option seemed more likely.

"I heal fast."

I looked at him. "Miracle fast."

He shrugged, but looked away uncomfortably.

Kenneth's eyes fell to ground level and hardened considerably. I didn't have to turn to know who had entered the kitchen. I almost laughed, and his eyes leapt to me at the sound. I bent down and stroked my black cat for a moment, and when her gaze also switched to me, I straightened up and started to dig through the cupboards the honestly silence behind me was as strange as ever.

"Scram," I told him lightly.

"Huh?" he asked, snapping out of his trance.

"I said scram," I told him. "I think Diana would very much prefer her meal in peace - go entertain yourself for five minutes."

He raised an eyebrow, but turned to leave. He grabbed my school bag on his way out and trudged his way up to my room. I was stunned. That was probably the first time he'd listened to me. I smiled to myself as I fixed Diana's dinner (or probably lunch, as I wouldn't be surprised if Dad forgot about her) and set it down. Her milky eyes were still staring in the direction Kenneth had gone so I pulled the door shut behind me, hoping that a barrier might restore some of her confidence.

I was still smiling to myself when I opened the door to my room. Kenneth was against the wall, book in hand. He glanced up so quickly that I wasn't sure it had really happened, and then the book was gone. His posture hadn't changed at all.

My eyes flew around the room, worried. First, I knew I was probably imagining things but had to be sure. Second, that was a freaky thing to imagine. Third, why on earth would I imagine him reading that?

Everything was fine and I was sure I was hallucinating until my eyes hit the desk. On my desk, my diary from the last year was lying, carelessly thrown aside. Now, I know that isn't where I left it.

I walked slowly over to it, keeping my eyes on him. They looked innocent, but I knew he could act, so that didn't reassure me. I knew he had been reading it, all I had to do was work out what he'd seen. I picked the closed diary up, and dropped it back on its spine before slotting my hand into the first separation of pages. It was a trick I'd picked up from somewhere, and usually revealed the last pages the book was open to. Sure enough, my week of fantasising about Rick was staring back at me. I flipped it closed and turned to face the guy beside the window.

He really knew how to piss a girl off.

Kenneth

Her eyes leapt from the book to me, and I knew she didn't need to be a genius to work it out. Whether or not she was a genius was something different, but she made the connection anyway. She just looked at

me for a moment and I shrugged at her unspoken (and correct) accusation.

"For goodness sake - what is your problem? Why on Earth are you so jealous of anyone who I even look at anyway?"

She'd yelled at me before; once when her brother was crying, but that wasn't so much a shout as a raised voice to be heard over the music; and again when she'd found the messages on the phone. That hadn't lasted long, and I hoped and assumed from my timing that she didn't actually remember that. I was extremely grateful that a natural defence of ours was that the humans forgot what had happened, and a little bit before that. Even that wasn't as mad as this.

I blinked; jealous? No.

Her hand reached quickly for the book.

Alethea

"Hey hon, what are you doing up so late?" I didn't start at the sound of my Mum's voice. She sounded so weary and tired it could hardly be considered

frightening. Even if it could, I'd heard her coming down the stairs so she didn't surprise me.

"I couldn't sleep," I told her, hitting the microwave button and turning to face her. "I thought that maybe some hot chocolate would help."

She smiled. "I always used to tell you that. Hot chocolate made with warm milk. That and some faint, calming music can't go wrong."

"Yeah, but I'm going to pass on the music. I broke my CD player and I don't think the whirrs of my computer can be thought of as soothing."

"When did that happen?" she asked. She started getting what she needed for a cup of tea.

"Just recently," I told her. I didn't think reciting the episode room this after either orally or mentally would help sleep to come any quicker. I didn't exactly aim my diary, but that meant it went spurring out and hit the CD player. Now it didn't work, which wasn't the most complicated thing to imagine.

"Well, does that mean you need a new one? Or is it saveable?"

"Uh," I stuttered. "I'm fine without one - but I'm pretty sure it isn't saveable."

Kenneth got to it after the book, and then I did my refusing thing again, and well...I didn't let my mind run into the details. I wasn't sure when I would accept that each time I was silent all it did was give me another bruise or a scratch, but I prayed he moved on before the thought had time to settle.

The microwave beeped and I pulled the milk out and poured it into my waiting cup. I shoved the jug in the dishwasher and turned back to stirring the power in. I had my thick dressing gown wrapped tightly around me, although it wasn't really cold.

"So, what are you doing up?" I asked. "With the hours you're working, you really should be asleep."

"Don't tell me that," she said, sitting down opposite me. "I've just had the same lecture from your father."

"Well we can't both be wrong," I said. She raised an eyebrow. "Ok, yes we can - but seriously Mum..."

"Yeah yeah, I know love." We both just sat and drank for a short while. "So did you do anything interesting today hon?"

"Not really," I shrugged. Nothing had turned out in my favour in the end, all I knew was that one minute we were shouting, and the next I woke up on my bed with him gone. It was getting ridiculous. Because I'd slept in the afternoon, I couldn't sleep in the evening, and that made me tired the next morning, and even though I was fully awake by the afternoon I fell asleep again any way. It was getting out of hand.

I drained my mug and rinsed it out, then I said goodnight to Mum. She called me back when I was a few steps up the stairs. I felt my eyelids drooping as I trudged back.

"Yeah?"

"Your dad tells me there's been some boy hanging around the house a lot. Are you..."

I grimaced slightly. "Don't worry about him. We're just...He'll be gone soon I expect." She was surprised by my tone.

"What makes you say that?"

"Just a hunch," I shrugged, although I knew it was more than that. He would be moving on sometime in the next week, but that wasn't a knowledge I could really replay to my parents.

"Ok darling."

"Night Mum," I murmured, already drifting as I stood in the doorway. She smiled lightly.

"Goodnight love."

Kenneth

"Hey bro!" yelled the arrogant voice of the figure that just burst into my room. I held my hand up to block the streaming light that flooded into through the shattered window. "Catching a few z's are we?"

I growled into my pillow and punched it.

"I'm sorry, what? I didn't catch that Amasa." She pulled her long black hair back to stop it covering her ears and leaned slightly in my direction, despite remaining on the opposite side of the room. I sat bolt upright, having lost the opportunity of sleep.

"I told you not to call me that!" I hissed.

"Yeah, sure, whatever." She smiled and straightened up. It shocked me. After seeing Alethea's gentle and subtle smile this afternoon, Lizzie's self-absorbed grin didn't do much to lighten my mood. "If you don't like me calling you by your name, I really don't know what to call you. The name fits if you ask me."

"I would never ask you anything," I snarled at her. She just smiled, sea eyes flashing as she antagonised me.

"If you say so bro," she chirped before bouncing out of my door. It swung closed behind her, but I still had to deal with the window.

"We do have a front door!" I yelled after her. Her giggles came back to me and she poked her head quickly around the door.

"I know that A," she told me. Her pale face couldn't care for anything but herself, but I doubted if her brain could either. "But where would be the fun in that?"

I grabbed something and lobbed it at her. She flashed her smile again, showing her pearly teeth before pulling the door closed behind her. The wooden chair slammed into the door and shatter on impact with a loud 'crack'. She giggled again and I threw myself back onto the bed, snarling into the pillow. Stupid sister.

"Oh, and bro?" she said, dashing back into the room and perching on the end of the bed. I didn't move, but she knew I was listening. What choice did I have when her high pitched squeal of a voice forced its way into my mind and there was no other distraction about? "Damien told me to remind you to watch your temper."

I launched myself off the bed but she was faster than me and already out the door. I stared at it for a moment. She was faster on her feet, but if I sprang, there was no way she'd managed anything. All that stood in the way was aged door, and that stood no chance.

"I just passing on the message," she called to me. "As the older sibling, I would hate to fail my father and

set a bad example to my younger brother by forgetting something like that."

I growled, fully volume - awake and annoyed now. When her laughter hit me again it took less than a second for me to jump for the window.

The sun was up, and I knew from its position that it hadn't been long since I'd gotten into the house. I only needed a few hours of sleep a day - one or two at the most - and now I knew I definitely wasn't going to get that. I'd been up all night, so I knew that I didn't want my sister to arrive. All she ever did was annoy me, and she did it with that special smirk of hers. I pushed my legs faster and I ran further into the trees, leaving it all behind me.

The one thing that caught me was that I had ended up comparing Lizzie to Alethea. I saw no connection between the two of them; one I hated, and the other...I supposed I liked. Well, I didn't not like her at any rate.

I knew I felt stupid for reading that blasted book. No, I felt stupid because I'd been caught. If I hadn't been so absorbed in her fascination; trying to find out

everything I could, I would have been paying enough attention to get the book back to where it had been before she came in; instead of having to run and sort it so that she couldn't see. In fact, if I hadn't been so absorbed in the first place, then I probably wouldn't have wanted to read it. I couldn't explain why I wanted to know about him.

Alethea's words rang in my mind. Jealous. It was something I'd never even thought of before, I mean, why would I need to? The girls at both this school and the last practically fell at my feet, and they completely forgot the rest of the world when I even looked at them. I suppose proper competition was something I hadn't experienced. Not that I was worried. I had seen from the way she'd written it that it had been a passing crush, and even if it hadn't, I shouldn't care.

My eyes didn't need time to adjust as I ran to the shade of the forest. The trees were thick and heavy here, with a small space - a clearing in the centre. Not a single beam of light invaded this space, and it never did. I could see everything easily, but only

because of my improved sight and the eerie glow of the falling sunlight quite a while away. To human eyes it would be pitch black, and because I was used to such clarity in my visions, even a dimmed scene like this was relaxing to me.

Alethea

"Relax," I got told with a smile. "He isn't here."

I blinked and looked to see Brad standing beside me. My eyes still jumped away and combed the crowd. "I don't know what you mean."

"You stink at lying."

"Only to people who know me well."

He laughed and I smiled, but my eyes refused to stop searching. I glanced at Brad and he was watching me. He smiled lightly when our eyes connected. "I mean it. He's not here."

"'He' could refer to about half of the student body," I informed him. I was beginning to believe him. I knew I wanted to believe him, but at the same time, I couldn't help feeling a little let down that Kenneth

wasn't here. I practically begged for some freedom on a daily basis, and now that I had some, I found myself waiting him with me.

"You know who I mean, please don't make me say his name," Brad said. "Just trust me that he isn't here."

"Brad," I said cautiously, turning my back on the numerous bodies entering the school and looked awkwardly at my feet. "What's going on with Miranda - I mean, she won't come near me, I get that, but you and her..."

He followed my lead and looked to the ceiling.

"I mean, you don't have to say, but-"

"No, it's fine," he assured me. "I just don't think that company is helping her much. She'll probably so better being alone for a while."

"But wont..." I began. I took a deep breath and hurried the words. "Won't you being with me only make her feel worse? Then she won't want to listen to you afterwards..."

"Don't worry about it, she'll come round."

"Hey," said a voice. I turned and saw Lucy. I smiled lightly. Brad just lit up. I was clearly not going to be a problem, if Miranda was going to be worried about anyone, it would be Lucy.

"Hi," I said. "So what's your schedule like for today?"

"Uh," she dug it out and handed it to me. I scanned quickly over it and smiled. Brad didn't look, but Lucy was too focused on me to see his stare. I subtly nudged him (and I do mean subtly, I didn't whack him in the ribs like they do in movies) and he snapped out of it just in time for her eyes to flick to him. Her gaze lingered on his face as well.

"Ok," I said, and both pairs of eyes swivelled back to me. I handed her the paper back. "That's one class with me."

She suddenly looked nervous - she didn't know that many other people yet. She was about to speak but I held my hand up.

"If you'll let me finish," I scolded. She smiled because she knew I was joking. "That's one class with me, and all of them with Brad."

Her expression lit up, and so did his. They both seemed stunned into silence for a moment and didn't look at each other; but when they did, both of them smiled even bright to see the other's reaction. Lovebirds.

I smiled, but only to myself. One day without a guy I should hate couldn't be so bad. And one day back in reality certainly couldn't. The only thing that ruined that thought was that I couldn't say I did hate him; not in the way I wanted to. He really seemed ok, once you looked past the reputation and the possessive and protective side to him. Possessive and protective usually amount to caring, don't they? Just overly so...

I kept the smile in place, but my mind was screeching the warning at me. Once you looked past the reputation, you forgot the reason for dislike; once you forgot that, you were susceptible; and once that happened, I knew where I'd end up. So I just had to keep his reputation in mind. If only I didn't want to forget it as much as I did...

Amos

"You know what, Leila?" Kenneth emphasised. "Maybe it's a good thing you got here when you did. We really need someone around who's got the time to clear the place up."

She glowered at him. "I told you never to call me that."

He smirked. "Same here."

I could see where this was going. Lizzie had tensed and had her hands flexed, ready to use her influence when she needed it. Kenneth was just ready for a fight, crouched forwards and totally prepared. We all knew he didn't stand a chance.

"Guys, I need to concentrate here," I pointed out. Lizzie relaxed slightly and straightened up, although Kenneth didn't trust it. Neither did I for that matter, but I was preoccupied. Lizzie bounced to my shoulder and I gave her a quick glance.

"What ya up to anyways?" she asked, her eyes scanning the pages of work before me. I ignored her, trying to move my hand faster across the page. She

picked up one of the maths sheets. "Isn't this just college junk?"

"Uh-huh," I murmured, flipping the page over so that I could finish on the back. The thing I really hated about being here, was that if I didn't go to some kind of college, people noticed; and if I did, there was a whole lot of work involved.

"Why are you even putting effort in?" she asked, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. I moved on to the next sheet. These essays dragged on for so long.

"Because," I told her, lobbing the broken pen across the room and grabbing another from the table. "It has to get done sometime. I just let it pile up and then spend half an hour on everything. They take so long, it's almost impossible."

"Half an hour?" she scoffed. "You take half an hour to get through all of that? I bet I could do it in ten minutes."

"Do you want to save me some time and do it for me then?"

"Nope," she told me innocently before hoping away again. Kenneth kept his eyes on her, and even I was suspicious of the tone.

"Didn't think so," I muttered to myself, flipping the sheet again. How on earth do other people have the concentration for this? Don't they usually spend about half an hour on each part? Or longer, I would guess...I sighed and flexed my finger for a second and I moved the essay to the table and picked up some of the equations I needed to do. I'd been around long enough to know that this sort of thing never came up in real life.

"And I am NOT your maid!"

I glanced up just in time to see Kenneth launch himself at her. She just smiled and before I knew what I was doing, I was up and in between them. I felt the stab of annoyance as the last twenty minutes of work flew up into the air and fluttered to the ground.

"Liz, stop it - now!" I told her. She ignored me and kept her eyes on Kenneth. He should have known better. "LIZ!"

She snapped out of it and Kenneth's eyes refocused on hers, pure hate burning in them. He was still on his knees, and breathing heavily. What I wouldn't give to be anywhere else right now.

"Shouldn't you two be more mature than this?" I said, looking from one to the other. Kenneth growled under his breath when Lizzie smiled sweetly at him.

"Well, I thought so," she said, taking a step forwards and looking down on Kenneth. "Apparently Amasa has other ideas."

"Whoa!" I said, restraining Kenneth with just one hand on his shoulder. I put my other over Lizzie's fist before she could do anything. "Both of you stop it - what are you? Five years olds?" Neither of them relaxed, but both of them resisted the urge to jump at each other again.

After a stressed moment, Kenneth straightened up and jerked back from my touch. With one more glance at Lizzie, he raced out of the front door, and I knew after a moment that he'd retreated into the trees again. I swear he spends more time out here than he did here.

"You shouldn't call him that," I scolded her after a moment.

"You call him it," she protested through her teeth, still set for a fight but knowing better than to pick it with me. Sometimes being the strongest one in the family helped an awful lot.

I sighed. "True, but only when I'm stressed - I don't do it just to annoy him, and you shouldn't either."

She pulled a face and darted out of the back door. I stared after her for a moment, but when my eyes fell on the papers that now littered the room, I pushed it all from my mind. This is just what happens when you get your sister home for a few weeks, everyone fights. I hated being the eldest; having to break the fights up got really tiring after a while, and it was as though the two of them needed around the clock attention.

Alethea

School went by in a flash. The only moments that I really remembered were the second's worth of memories and illusions that it had taken me hours to

perfect. It didn't seemed to make any sense; but I supposed for me, when you're imagining a scene in your head, and you want to make it perfect, you replay it again and again, just like if you were really doing it for a class or something. After one class with Brad and Lucy - in which I was actually able to concentrate, or muck about, depending on your definition - I'd practically had the whole day alone. Miranda was in three of my classes, but since the whole Kenneth thing, we'd pretty much parted.

So, I'd ended up spending most of the day daydreaming; and these daydreams always managed to twist themselves into something related to Kenneth. The one image that wouldn't leave me alone, was the smile that I'd almost seen yesterday. The subtleness of it just made him seem so different.

I was still wrapping my head around the idea that he wasn't there when the final bell rang at three. The odd looks that I had received on the short trip from the changing rooms to my locker after PE had assured me that he wasn't there. I felt slightly crushed that he wasn't, but I knew he just wasn't in

school today. I reminded myself of that fact when I rounded the last corner and saw the empty space beside my locker. Then I reminded myself that I didn't want him to be there, even if he had been in school today.

When I got home I was greeted by my hassled Mum rushing out the door and yelling a hello over her shoulder; my dad waving her away and pulling me into the kitchen; and my brother just nodding off to sleep in the lounge. I was all set to take him upstairs and dump my school things, but Dad just said to leave him. He looked so comfortable where he was, I wasn't sure I could bear to move him anyway. His full lips curled up at the corners when I ran my hand lightly over is hair, and after another few seconds, his eyes were closed and his breathing relaxed.

"Allie, can you come into the kitchen for a moment?" Dad asked. I was still watching Charlie, and thinking about how much I was neglecting him lately. Usually, he was just the centre of everything for me; but lately, aside from handing him the occasional toy, he had been pretty much removed from my life.

It took a moment for my dad's words to sink in, but even when they did I couldn't register the tone he used to deliver them. He didn't move, waiting for my reply, but when it came I knew it sounded distracted. "Uh, yeah Dad, sure..."

He seemed uncomfortable when he moved back into the hall and I heard him scuffle through to the kitchen. I sighed as I stood up, and with one more fleeting glance in Charlie's direction, followed suit. I put the smile onto my face when I enter the kitchen, recognising that at least for one day; I did have the freedom I had been pining for.

"What's up Dad?" I asked, spinning the chair closest to me out from the table and sinking into it. Whether it was Kenneth's absence or something else, I couldn't help but notice that today I seemed more energetic than normal. That meant that I had promised myself that I would not fall asleep before I was comfortably in my bed tonight.

He didn't look pleased with my perkiness, although I could see that he was trying to hide it. "Nothing much. What about with you?"

"Nothing much," I mimicked, adding a shrug into the moment.

"I notice that Kenneth isn't here," he mentioned. I could see he was beating around the bush, but whatever it was he needed to say, I knew he'd get there eventually. He wasn't paying attention to my reaction, so he didn't see the falter in my expression.

"He couldn't make it today," I told him. I wasn't sure how my tone came across. I knew that it should sound pleased, but it didn't seem quite right. What was that edge? Was it worry? It sounded like disappointment. I tried not to let my mind tell me that I knew he'd never missed a whole day before. Dad was too distracted to notice whatever messages were implied in my tone, for which I was extremely grateful.

He just nodded. I jumped slightly when Diana curled around my legs, startled by her appearance. I guess that Kenneth's reaction to her entries over that last few days had given me a warning and I'd fallen out of practise of just noticing her. I stroked her quickly,

fully aware of the comforting sir she was emitting without our usual guest.

"Hey Di," I said to her as my hand ran swiftly down her coat. She purred under my touch and I smiled as the sound reached me. I looked back to Dad. "So, was Mum here for the whole day?"

"No," he replied. He was trying to steer the conversation in his direction; but I had no idea which way that was. "She only came home for a short while, there was something we needed to sort out."

I nodded. I was curious as to what that something was, but I decided not to ask. For lack of anything better to do, I got up and grabbed a glass off of the side. I just had a quick drink, but the silence lasted through it, and it was impossible for me not to feel the tension emanating from my dad's figure.

Eventually there was nothing for it but to get out of the room. Whatever it was that was playing no Dad's mind, he clearly didn't want to say; and I was fully conscious of the fact that my presence wasn't helping to minimise the stress. I formulated an English paper

to excuse myself to my room, muttering something about late deadlines on the way out.

I was half way up the stairs when my Dad came out. He stopped at the bottom of them, and there was a slight pause before he spoke. His voice was impossible to read; all I heard was the urgency in his hurried tone.

"Alethea - we can't afford the hotel."

I stopped mid-step, his words having an immediate impact on me. I turned around to face him, and saw the truth of the statement in his features. Even with that, I wasn't sure I could believe it. "What do you mean? How can you not? You've been saving for ages, and-"

"Prices go up hon, that's how the worlds works."

I just gaped at him. My body refused to do anything else. When the concept of speech eventually returned to me, my words were still a denial. "But that's not possible - you were sure you could afford it."

"I know love, we're just as disappointed as you," he said. I didn't think so; they must be more

disappointed than I was. I wanted it for them; and they wanted their celebration.

"But..." I began. The words were completely lost to me. "That's - that's just no fair." I knew it sounded childish, but anything more mature just wouldn't come.

"The world isn't fair," Dad said solemnly.

I looked down. Oh God. They'd been saving for ages; and this was a really big deal - and now it just wasn't going to happen. I was staring into space, but nothing was staring back.

"So, your mother and I were thinking," he told me. My vision refused to return to him, but he knew I was listening. What could possibly make up for missing out on that? "This weekend we're all going to do something. Just as a family."

Now my eyes immediately snapped into focus. He was looking straight at me, but I could think of nothing to say. The silence dragged on for too long and I eventually choked out an 'ok'.

Dad looked away for a moment, and then wandered through to the lounge, presumably to pick up Charlie and move him to his bed. I turned on the stairs and headed up to my room before anything could really hit me.

I just had to hope Kenneth got bored of me before the weekend. There was no way that I'd get away with another day without him. The thing that I hated the most was that I didn't want him to move on that quickly.

Susan

My fleeting eyes brushed the clock again. It frustrated me to see the miniscule amount that they had moved again. Just because of my paranoia, I check my watch as well. I received the same result.

Harry would have told her by now; Charlie would be none the wiser; and I was still working double shifts because I couldn't get out of the trades I'd already agreed to. My fingers were tapping furiously at the keys and the corresponding letters appeared dutifully on the computer screen before me. I currently had two hundred words of a two thousand

word report completed; but I knew that at least the last hundred and fifty were gibberish.

After everything - from booking the room months in advance to working the day, night and double hour shifts in this claustrophobic office - the manager had the nerve to phone and say the room was no longer available. We both knew what that meant. Either someone had paid extra to reserve the room last minute or the manager had a close friend coming to stay. I groaned and pushed the keyboard with excessive force towards the computer.

I couldn't even be embarrassed by the glances that colleges gave me. I knew most of them were aware of the hours I was working at the minute. I was gossip of the office at the moment, which was never a good thing here. They all thought I was pushing my limit, and my outrage would only appear to prove them right.

"I'm taking a break," I told Sandra quietly but fiercely. She nodded her head, clearly believing that a break was the best thing for me. I kept my angry eyes on the rough carpet as I hurried my way to the door;

attempting - and probably failing - to avoid all of the sceptic and assuming stares that undoubtedly followed me.

The wind whipped across my face as I stepped out of the building and I watched the usual four o'clock bustle working their way down the road. My cropped hair was lifted for a moment before my brisk movement continued, carrying me across the street as my well-known argument played out in my head.

You promised Harry you wouldn't.

He'll never know.

It wastes you money and it's bad for your health.

Money isn't exactly a problem for me at the moment; and besides, any damage is already done - I doubt if one short, sharp gust is going to harm anything beyond repair.

That's how most smokers start out. Then they get addicted.

I already am addicted. I just gave it up. One cigarette won't hurt.

If you gave it up, you shouldn't need it. For all you know, one cigarette is all you need to go through the whole thing again - and you know what that would do to Alethea.

And to Charlie.

Exactly.

I bit my lip and debated for a moment, my hand hovering above the shop's handle. One blink and I was thinking it couldn't hurt; the next and I couldn't believe that was possible. After a fragile moment, I made my decision.

Stuff you.

I pushed my way into the store and bought a single pack of Raffles. I instinctively turned the photo on the packet into my hand so that I didn't have to see it. My other hand fished the neglected lighter out of my hand bag and I wandered down to the alley behind my work.

I watched the threatening flame for a moment before I touched it to the tobacco. It lit instantly, and I

inhaled deeply, missing the feeling. I hadn't even noticed that I'd missed it until I'd got it back.

You'll regret it.

I'll cross that bridge when I get there. It helps with the stress.

It was only when I threw the empty packet away and saw all of my cigarette stubs that littered the ground that I realised addiction wasn't something I should tempt. Harry's face flashed into my mind. Then my daughter's. Then my son's. My slow, widened eyes swivelled to the lighter grasped in my hand.

Alethea

My tired hand rubbed my head and I looked at the sapphire eyes watching me. If I didn't know any better, I'd probably make some connection between Kenneth's presence and my unplanned naps after my success in remaining awake yesterday.

I had to drop my gaze to the ground and my hand moved to my neck. It was something that I hadn't done in a while, but I still didn't understand the urge to do it. I couldn't stop the convulsing shiver that ran

through me. I didn't even bother to try and halt the one that followed. There was something seriously wrong with me, but I had no idea what it was. I couldn't work out why my only memorable thoughts before I slipped into sleep were of constriction and encasement.

School hadn't been strange or hard or anything. It had just been a normal day; normal including Kenneth's protest against my time with anyone else. He'd won on that one; the look in his eyes told me not to challenge him today. One quick glance revealed that look was gone now.

It was with my eyes on the floor and the confusion on my face that I rose once again from the bed, trying to work out why this strange sleeping pattern had emerged.

When I heard my Dad's car pulling away from the drive, I looked to the window and saw the Octavia making its way down the narrow road. The expression on my face was different now, although I hadn't registered what had changed. Kenneth's silence did nothing to boost my confidence.

I didn't let my eyes touch him as I turned towards the door, and I kept my gaze trained downwards as I descended the stairs. I moved mechanically to the kitchen and got myself some water, deciding that these strange feeling were probably some form of dehydration. The drink didn't help anything, but it occupied my hands and mouth for a few moments.

Throughout the school day I had no doubt that my tension had displayed both through my actions and my expressions. Somehow I needed to tell him that this weekend was off; but I knew enough to know that it probably wouldn't go down too well. It wasn't helped by the fact that the discomfort I felt with Kenneth near hadn't subsided in his absence; but that I couldn't quite bring myself to want to be away from him.

There was a way that I wouldn't have to tell him about this, but I didn't want to risk it; if I got to Saturday and hadn't told him...

It could be that this refusal would be the last straw, and would only make him move on faster. Why did that only make me want to tell him less?

"Kenneth," I began, fixing my nervous gaze on my hands, which were running smoothly over the empty carpet in front of me. With the chairs and sofas of the lounge only a few meters away from me I couldn't explain why I felt more comfortable on the ground; but it was a feeling that refused to be negotiated. I closed my mouth again, not sure what I would say.

"Yes?" he hinted after a moment. My eyes flicked up to his, and he was watching me intently. This time, I was able to control the shiver that wanted to run through me; and settled for meekly dropping my eyes.

"You know...this weekend..." My voice trailed off, and whilst I knew that this would be more likely to annoy him than anything else, my mind was flashing images of what possible outcomes of this could be. None of them looked to pleasant, so I only wanted to avoid the confrontation.

He didn't look impressed, but I had seen worse expressions on his features. He wasn't angry; yet. I just had to be careful, and hope that I could do this. That hope wasn't strong and it completely

extinguished after a second. My thudding heart was proof that I couldn't do this.

"One day is one day," he reminded me.

"I know," I consented. I watched my fingers tracing patterns in the carpet. This was so useless. I shouldn't feel this way; it was as though I was confessing to a bank robbery or something. He shouldn't be able to make me so weary, and, as far as I could tell, he did it without even realising.

"But?" he guessed. I nodded my head slightly, but was neither comforted nor discouraged when he didn't move. If he didn't move or shout, that either meant it wasn't that bad...or it was extremely so.

Time was ticking by slowly, almost to annoy me. I guess that the rolling seconds enjoyed my distress. He was leaning against the wall beside the door, and as my eyes sidled their way over to him, I noticed that he didn't seem upset. Yet. I stopped them and returned my gaze to my hands.

He sighed and I bit my lip. That was never a good sigh. When he spoke, his voice was controlled, but it

didn't sound as though it would break any time soon. "Will you at least do me one favour and tell me what you're trying to say, so that I'm not left guessing?"

Personally, I wasn't too keen on that idea, but I wasn't bold enough to say that. I might be able to stand up to him on occasions, but I wasn't a total idiot. So why was I training the conversation in a direction or total idiocy?

"It's..." I sighed, making up my mind. I was going to have to say this, so I may as well do it quickly. The sooner it all starts, the sooner in finishes. "This weekend is my parents' anniversary and they want to do something together as a family."

I peeked out from under my lashes to look at his expression. His position hadn't changed in the slightest, and his muscled arms were folded across his chest from habit more than anything else. Well, he didn't look angry.

"Right," he said; and that was all he said for a while. I wanted to know what was running through his mind, even if it was just so that I knew what I could say to ease it. I was waiting for some kind of sign of

annoyance; a stiffen, a twitch, a movement or a glance; but I got nothing.

After a moment, I felt my body telling me to move my eyes away, but I didn't. There was no reason for the unease that pestered me, so I just decided to ignore it. He was perfectly still for a while, but I played on my patience, knowing that hurrying his thoughts would be the opposite of helpful.

"Unfortunately, the definition of 'one day' doesn't exactly fit with that arrangement."

My heart fell. I knew I couldn't really expect any more. I couldn't refuse my parents; I would stop whatever they were planning right after someone else had. I wasn't going to leave them on their anniversary when they wanted me here. A few blinks erased the tears that attempted to come forward, although I couldn't be sure why they were there. Was it because I knew I would have to say no to one of them, and I knew I didn't want to?

"Besides," he said matter-of-factly. "I've just erased your parents' schedules for the weekend." I froze and my eyes slid, controlled, over to his. He was spinning

an envelope over in his hands and watching the paper curiously.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I was eyeing the small white paper with a weary expression. Whilst the unease I had felt previously was minimal now, his interest in the object he held worried me.

He chuckled. My eyes jumped up to his and he tossed me the envelope. I caught it reflexively. It was just another letter with my parents' names on. Our address was printed in slanting, graceful handwriting across the front. I turned it over a few times, but there was nothing unusual.

"What's in here?" I asked slowly, holding the sealed letter up.

"One of these," he said, throwing me another sheet of paper. It was a brochure for the hotel Mum and Dad had been going to stay in. My expression was still confused. "And a letter."

"What does the letter say?" I asked, still failing to make any connections.

"It congratulates your parents on winning some kind of competition and explains they have the first prize which a three night package at the hotel - Friday evening to Monday morning this weekend."

I couldn't say anything, my mind had completely cut off. He smiled. It wasn't his usual smile; this one was soft. My voice returned after a moment.

"And was there really a competition?" I asked.

He shook is head, still smiling his gentle smile. "You would be surprised at what you can create when Amos is helping out."

"Kenneth, I can't..."

He crossed the room and took the letter out of my hands. He tossed it onto the top of the scattered pile of unopened letters from today. "You don't have to do anything. It's all done and paid for."

"That's what I mean," I said. That was the other reason every girl wanted him. Money. There was no way I was going to let that happen. Not only would I know how much it had cost him, it just seemed wrong to start with. "It's so much, you can't-"

"Like I said," he interrupted. "It's all done and paid for, so if they don't go it's only a waste."

I couldn't say I completely understood the gesture; but I couldn't say I wasn't thankful. And thankful was such an understatement. If it wasn't for the breathtaking expression that was still on his face, I would have been ecstatic. As it was, I was content to just see him.

The smile that was still on his face was different; I'd never seen it there before. I'd never had a reason or a chance to; but I was pretty sure it was because it had never been there before.

I wasn't sure what was on my expression, and I was surprised that I could say my heart didn't quicken at the sight. Aside from whatever was playing in my eyes, it could almost be as though nothing had changed. My own lips moved to a smile. With that smile on him, he looked completely transformed.

Kenneth

That cleared the weekend. That was all, I tried to tell myself as I looked from her joyful lips to her tender

eyes. It was just for the time. No matter how many times my brain repeated the loathsome dirge, I couldn't quite get the message behind it to sink in.

The vulnerability of the expression my features took on was foreign to me; it wasn't something that I like to think about. I knew how easily the expression could falter, and had seen a millions times that it would never last for long - but I liked it. If she really wanted to, I knew Alethea would be able to wipe the smile from my face; but she didn't.

I didn't mean to do it as I sat down beside her. It was as though something else was controlling my movements, but not the hateful puppeteer who had moved me so ruthlessly on past occasions. This time I was almost being run by thoughts that refused to be shown. She didn't move away or flinch or anything as I lowered myself. Soon I was right beside her. Her eyes were connected to mine. The inviting shade of brown wasn't wavering in sight or position, showing no sign of the discomfort I had become accustomed to in her.

I couldn't really describe what I was feeling. There had never really been anything like that for me before. I knew what I felt and I knew why I felt it; so what was the urge to reach out and touch her as we both sat, unmoving, upon the softened carpet of her lounge? Why did it seemed as though there was a glass barrier between us; one that could be seen through but not touched?

This was new; that was the only word for it. I couldn't remember the last time I had felt like this. My only thoughts for so long had been about how simple everything was, and my only feelings about it were detest and annoyance. That was all there ever could be. You live; you die. Not when you're like me. People like me just need blood every day, and people like me but older still needed it every week or so. You could sit back and watch the world go by, but you couldn't make a name for yourself.

If everything was so simple, why did I feel so lifted to see the answering smile on Alethea's face? Why was I so quietly pleased by the gratitude in her eyes and

the feelings that showed through? I had seen them before, but not on her, and never like this.

The beginning of what I saw engraved on her features was something I had seen countless times before. I had seen it in many eyes and in endless expressions; I had watched it grow and grow, feeding my confidence as it did so - but I had never seen it like this. I had never seen it so subtle and withdrawn; never so nervous and hesitant...never so...honest.

What I saw hiding in her eyes was nothing more or less that the softest, earliest and most captivating stage of devotion.

Diana

I watched. I waited. The sky darkened. I knew he was there, so I hadn't approached the house. Having been perched upon the harsh texture of the wooden fence for most of the afternoon, I wanted nothing more than to just sneak my way in and retreat to the softness of the house.

There was no movement that I could see, but I knew they were there. Just the two of them. There was no

sound from inside, no sights or senses. How could she stand to be near him, especially for this length of time? My fur down my back prickled and began to stand as I visualised him.

The low hiss the came from my chest echoed in the night, but there was nothing near to hear it. With slow and controlled movements, I finally consented to lowering myself into the flickering mess of the unkempt grass. My eyes were fixed upon the back door, but nothing was stirring. I timed my movements to the gentle breeze and slinked my way through the vegetation, crouched; low and discreet.

I wearily stepped into the pool of artificial, light the poured from the uncurtained window to the kitchen. Even pressed up against the wall, I knew nothing had changed during my journey across the lengthy garden. With lungs full of confident air, I slipped in my door and glued myself to the base of the kitchen's supple counter. I edged my way wearily towards the door, and my precise eyes focused on the pair.

Neither of them noticed me, and I slipped, unseen, unheard and invisibly, up the steep stairs. As I settled

myself onto the bed in my carer's room, I could shake the feeling that something was very, very wrong. Even as my exhausted eyes closed, the truth of it was something that would leave my mind.

Kenneth

There she goes; again. I shook my head as I watched her, but she didn't see that - she was too preoccupied. She really didn't get the 'with me' concept, and the more I understood that, the more annoying the whole thing got. I raised an eyebrow when she turned back to me.

"Don't say it," she said, clearly hassled by everything. I suppose, technically, it wasn't Alethea's fault. I couldn't really say anything about the four teachers who'd decided to see her in the last twenty minutes. The five friends in between, however, I had a lot to say about. I thought I'd dealt with that. "I know what you're thinking, just please don't say it."

Even thought she was hassled, she was obviously enjoying the adrenaline of it all. One conversation after another, barely time to move between them. I guess that made sense when she wasn't used to the

rush of it all. The thing that seemed odd was that this even seemed fast to me. I suppose that was because time at school was pretty much uneventful as far as I was concerned, so even this was a step up from normal. Fast for me was...well...I had a sudden vision of her if she saw how fast I could really move, despite the fact I knew that would never happen.

"I really doubt that you know what I'm thinking," I told her with a sly smile, still trying to picture her expression if she ever did see that speed.

She scrutinised my expression for a moment, the smile hinting at her lips, and the excitement of the hurried break lingering in her eyes. She was pleased when she saw that I meant it, although I had no idea why.

Her expression mirrored mine as it fell, although hers was tinged with confusion. When she heard her name being called across the crowded corridor, the understanding lit her expression and she smiled for a half a second. When I raised an eyebrow she bit her lip, nervous. I just waved it off; there were two minutes left before the bell, so I rolled my eyes and

turned away. I knew I wouldn't even get these two minutes.

Of course, I thought to myself as I turned the corner. I could have glanced back, but I knew I'd only see her in the middle of some kind of conversation with someone else, and that was the opposite of what I wanted. The new girl. It didn't matter what Alethea (or I) had done before, now that she had to babysit that girl, everybody forgot what she'd done.

I wasn't going to do it again, that was certain. I doubted if people would believe she'd send those messages now, and even if they did, she'd know what had happened.

Last night seemed so far away. It felt like a century ago that I'd had her in front of me, with no-one else's eyes following her. For a long while, we just hadn't said anything, both of us completely lost in out own thoughts. Now, my thoughts didn't seem to want to be anything other than annoyed. It seemed almost like a distant dream. Except I didn't dream. I didn't fantasise, imagine, create or visualise. There was no point.

Contradiction was something I barely had to experience, and even when I did it never came from my own mind. That didn't explain why part of my mind was focused on the walls and paths before me, when the main part was formulating moments that hadn't happened yet. The moments were all completely incompatible, except for the presence of one person throughout them all.

Alethea

I watched as he walked away, wishing that the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach wouldn't appear but being unsurprised when it did. It had been the same yesterday. When my Dad eventually returned, we'd stirred. I don't know about Kenneth, but I definitely had to make an effort to stop my eyes wandering to his every few seconds. Then again, with Kenneth being the way he was, he probably wouldn't try to hide it. That might explain the odd look that Dad gave me.

I was daydreaming again; I knew it. It was probably nothing more than an average evening for him. He was the type of guy who could forget that sort of

thing instantly. To him, it would have been as though nothing had changed. I hated the way my chest felt crushed at that likely possibility.

"Alethea!"

I turned when Lucy called my name this time. I hoped that I hadn't been staring too long, and that I didn't look as hurt as I felt that Kenneth hadn't looked back. That was just proof - he could walk away without a care in the world. I had always known that, but it stung to remember.

"Hey Luce," I said when she reached me. I gave her a slight smile as the hectic, continual and complicated conversations of the last fifteen minutes caught up to me.

Kenneth

"Sorry, I got kept behind after class."

I didn't say anything this time. I tried to ignore the fact that the hallway was almost empty; neglect the thoughts that told me this was later than it should be; and forget that the same thing had happened this morning. I successfully failed all three.

She wrenched her locker open and I trained my gaze on the ground as she transferred books from her bag to her locker, then from her locker to her bag. She seemed hurried and when I glanced up at her she was slightly flushed. That didn't explain why it seemed so slow to me.

"What did you do to get kept behind?" I asked, casting around for some kind of distraction. Even I couldn't ignore that it was strange that she'd so something that she'd end up behind for. Everyone at this school knew Alethea was a top student.

"I had some kind of essay due in that I forgot. Mr Palmer had a video set up for us to watch, but if you hadn't done the essay, you did it in the lesson. But seeing as I had to go out of the lesson, he decided to keep me behind ten minutes so that I could finish. You'd think teachers had better things to do with the weekend. Then again, Mr Palmer isn't exactly..."

"Why did you have to come out of the lesson?" I asked as she leant against the locker beside me, calming down after a hurried day. The flush was still on her cheeks, and my eyes stayed on her face.

"I had to go to reception," she told me simply. She looked away slightly and her expression faltered. "There was a note from Dad."

"Saying?"

She looked down. Her stance was relaxed, but she seemed tense when she spoke. Her tone was low, and I could only just hear it. "He has to sort something out at the office. The whole computer system crashed, and he's the only one who's qualified to look at it. The company's going through a total cheap phase, so they're getting him to check it before they bring in a professional - everyone notice how he was after money, so they promised him a huge bonus if he finds out what was wrong."

"Couldn't he just say no? He doesn't need the money that much anymore." She smiled slightly, and glanced up at me.

"Thanks," she said.

I smiled. Even without the glint in her eyes I knew it was the same smile she'd seen last night; the one it didn't feel like I'd used in years. "No problem."

"But he couldn't say no. Because they're going through a total cheap phase, they're willing to fire practically anyone."

"How fickle," I commented. She smiled.

"So he won't be there when I get back, and probably won't be until late tonight. Mum's probably still working, and Dad dropped Charlie off at Joe's on his way, so she'll be bringing him back in a while."

She looked away from me to the abandoned hallway and laughed lightly. Her laugh was just...

"So that probably means we should be going."

"Probably," she agreed.

Alethea

The phone rang as soon as we got it. In fact, it had probably been ringing since we were at the bottom of the drive, but I was too absorbed to notice anything then. Almost stumbling on the drive and then being caught brought me back to earth though. I grabbed it on the last ring and pulled it up to my ear, the tangles in the cord falling away as I did so. I was

just about to speak when the doorbell went. I shot Kenneth a glance and he rolled his eyes before wandering back again.

"Hello?" I said, putting the receiver to my ear.

"Heya," answered a calm voice from down the line. It didn't take my revived memories from three days ago to recognise the soft tone.

"Rick?" I laughed in surprise, not sure whether I was more pleased or shocked. Either way, I lost track of everything for a second.

"Yep," he replied, popping the sound on the 'p'.

"How did you get this number?" I asked him.

From the pause, I could imagine him simply shrugging in answer before he spoke. "I asked around."

I smiled. "I suppose that could also be put as, you pestered Kate until she gave it to you just to shut you up?"

"If you want to make it sound that bad," he consented. "I just like to look at it as exercising my persistent qualities."

I laughed. What else could I do? Almost everything he said made me laugh, whether it was purposeful or not.

"Say, do you-"

His voice cut off.

It didn't take me long to see why. I would have seen before it happened too, if I had been bothered. I had had my sight fixed out of the window, so only when I looked back at the phone's pad did I see Kenneth's hand beside it. I bit down my automatic response to that.

"Oops," he said. I didn't hear anything in that word, but I just sighed and replaced the phone again.

"That was rude," I told him, my fingers following the swirls of the table. He didn't say anything to deny it, but nothing to appease it either. Rick probably would phone back straight away; and when he did, he couldn't be that hard to think of an excuse.

Kenneth

There was a moment when nothing happened. Then her attention was instantly revolving around the toddler. I don't know if she noticed the change in his face when his attention drifted to me, but I enjoyed that. Aside from those occasional pleasures, the afternoon simply dragged. I didn't know how this could entertain her, but she seemed to be having as much fun as he was.

First a line of people during school hours, and now a demanding brother, did this girl never get any peace? Or any time for me?

The time ticked by slowly, each antagonising minute changing slowly to the next; and every minute brought another stab of irritation to me. I may as well have not been there for everything that happened.

The lounge seemed much more crowded today, and the addition of only one person shouldn't do that. Eventually, I just kept my gaze on him, knowing that in a moment he'd squeal of move or do something to bring it back again. Christ this was hell.

It dragged and dragged and dragged. I just stood, leant against the doorframe as she rushed around. First for her brother; then for that loathsome cat. I didn't even get a glance from Alethea when 'Diana' arched her back and hissed. I was almost entertained at the prospect of retaliation, but that passed quickly.

Alethea

My gaze drifted when Charlie eventually began to relax. I had noticed the hardening in Kenneth's eyes every time he looked at Charlie, but I knew that if I said anything, it would only make matters worse. It was now, when Charlie's eyelids were beginning to droop, that I really notice the expression Kenneth had set in place.

"Kenneth," I said, weary now. I took a step towards him, trying to get a look in his eyes, but they were avoiding mine with ease. With Charlie in such easy reach of him, I didn't even dare to consider what he could do; until his jaw flexed. I saw with a jolt that he would do it. "Kenneth, don't."

I knew within a second that that hadn't helped anything. Whatever he was thinking, me trying to tell

him what not to do didn't help. I fell silent, but my mind was telling me clearly what he was about to do. I hadn't even thought about it as he sank into the background, but when I did; all day had been...

"Kenneth," I warned him, taking another step. Even Charlie had fallen silent, his eyes remained open and were in the same place as mine; upon the Kenneth's shaking fist. My heart pounded in my chest.

"I can think of one way to make you understand," he said; his low voice harsh and threatening.

His eyes flashed to mine and I saw the resolve in them. I knew what he was talking about, even if I didn't want to. He could think of one way to maintain my attention; one way to stop me from paying any attention to anyone else. I knew what that way was too, I had just hoped he would never use it.

I dived in front of Charlie just as Kenneth moved, and the blow caught me across the shoulder. I gasped as the strength of it knocked me to the floor. I immediately knew that throwing my hands out was a mistake, and my arms buckled under the weight. I

whipped my hair out of my face and turned back where I was. I was too shocked to move.

My eyes pricked and they didn't move from his hand; still poised for another swing. My shoulder was screaming in pain, but I didn't let it distract me. My throat tied and I had no way to know whether or not I could stop a second hit.

His eyes were on mine when I looked into them.

I wasn't sure what I could see in them; but it certainly wasn't anything I'd seen there before. I'd seen anger, pleasure, annoyance, upset and irritation, but never this combination. I couldn't even tell myself what was there, let alone guess the reasons behind it all.

I blinked and he was gone.

Chapter 4

Blood Stained Ruby Part 4

One Question...Or More

Alethea

"Don't give me that look," I said to him. My tone was completely emotionless, but I couldn't stand the way he was staring at me.

"What look?" Kenneth asked. His gaze didn't move; he didn't even blink, and he knew exactly what I was talking about. I only answered because I knew what he could do if I didn't.

"The look that you're wearing at the moment," I told him, answering his next question without giving him

a chance to ask it. "I wasn't here, fair enough. It was for your advantage though."

"How do you arrive at that?"

I still wasn't looking at him as I busied my hands by scrubbing down the kitchen counters. "I was dropping Charlie off for a day at Jo's, and he's staying overnight and I'll be picking him up tomorrow evening."

He got here just before I got back. Of course, after yesterday's episode, I had tried to avoid that, but it hadn't worked. Getting Charlie out of the way made the whole weekend easier; I didn't have to worry about him and Kenneth didn't have to moan about him. It also meant that I had no distractions whatsoever for the next two days, making the idea of the weekend almost unbearable.

He didn't deny it. He saw what I saw; a whole weekend without distractions. To him it was a blessing, to me a curse. I still owed Jo way more than she knew for taking Charlie for two days.

I groaned in frustration when one mark refused to come off. I'd never been big on cleaning, but now that I'd started I saw how much the counter really needed it. I rubbed it hard with the rag in my hand but it was just as stubborn as ever. Kenneth raised an eyebrow. I knew it was stupid, but it kept my hands busy. There were no living distractions in this house, but I was sure I could come up with a few inanimate ones if I had to.

His hand hovered over mine for a second and I pushed the cloth away. He grabbed it and gave the counter two quick rubs with it. My expression turned sour to see how easily it vanished for him. I held my hand out for the cloth again but he shook his head and tossed it across the room. That was one distraction gone.

My eyes followed it, but I didn't move after it. His eyes were on my face when I looked back to him, with his expression a little confused. I slumped back against the counter.

"So what's on the agenda for today?" I asked absently, focusing my gaze on the swinging pendulum of the

clock on the wall. He didn't say anything for a moment, but the pause didn't worry me.

"I was thinking that I might actually introduce you to my brother this time, you know, instead just seeing him."

I nodded once.

Lizzie

I smiled. Leaning against the frontward facing window of the third story, I remembered all of the afternoons I had spent here as I grew up. Then I remembered how Kenneth - as I had to call him - had always ruined them. It was only when my powers started to develop that he'd left me alone. At the time I thought that it meant that he had finally learnt not to bug me. Apparently, time away from me made him forget that lesson. I couldn't deny that it had been fun, seeing him like that. Amos wasn't too please though, and with you brother is stronger, bigger and older than you, it's best not to upset him. He wasn't faster though. That was mine.

I opened the silent window wide, and felt the gust of wind against my skin. I mounted the ledge before me and - with a quick glance around - pounced. Height wasn't my speciality, and I cringed slightly when I landed, but nothing serious happened. My ankle stung for a second, but I knew it would be healed by the next hour.

I never knew what drew me to that jump. I knew it was stupid, and Apasia had always scolded me for it, but I had jumped it all the same. My only hint was the thrill of the fall; just the feeling of tumbling through the piercing air. Even when I could see the coming ground and land with perfect, the freedom of the movement still astounded me.

Kenneth could jump better than me. I laughed out loud as I started to run. That was one thing I could let him keep; one title that maybe he could claim. I would never trade that for this speed.

My frantic eyes searched the bark of the trees around me. The scents and smells of nature encased me. God I hated it. Why would the guys choose to live here?

Trees, leaves, nature and junk. I still couldn't help the smile and I began to twist around in a wide ark.

I hadn't realised how long I had run, but I could faintly feel time slipping away. I eventually turned my circle in on itself and headed for the front of the house. The one bad thing about exiting through the upstairs, was that my climbing wasn't that great either, so I was usually stranded outside for a while. It was all rather amusing when I walked in the front door and Kenneth looked at me like I was mad. I didn't exactly tell them that I jumped from the third floor, and that meant that they thought I was upstairs. Of course, as these trips got more frequent, it surprised them less and less, but still...

This time, I was the one who was startled when I walked through to the lounge. I had been so caught up in my own thoughts that I hadn't noticed any company. Amos saw the surprise in my eyes, and gave me a disapproving look; unimpressed by my lack of attention.

"Hi," I said, extending my hand in her direction. "I'm Lizzie."

She smiled politely, but I knew I couldn't be the only one who realised that the defence never left her eyes. She shook my hand quickly, her eyes staying on my face. One, instant glance in Kenneth's direction told me it was more to avoid him than to see me.

"Alethea," she told me. "Nice to meet you."

I smiled. "I bet you haven't heard a lot about me, the girl of the lot."

"It's true," she admitted. I opened my mouth to speak, but Kenneth cut in, clearly realising my intentions. I smiled as he looked at me, although this smile was more guarded. I wouldn't have anything too bad, just enough to embarrass him and please me.

"Alethea, why don't we go upstairs?" he suggested quickly. She looked down rather than to him, and even although I couldn't kid myself into believing his clear discomfort at this arrangement didn't please me, I couldn't avoid the obvious knowledge that I was missing something important.

"If you want," she replied. She didn't know that the catch in her voice was noticeable to all of us,

although human ears wouldn't detect it. The detached tone she used was unnatural, even to me, and I had never heard her voice before now. I had been around the world, but there was something about her voice...I'd grown up in the strangest household imaginable, with anger, pleasure, victory, vicious, protective, threatening, determined and ecstatic tones twirling in my mind; and I couldn't place this.

My eyes flicked between my brothers. Kenneth was focused on Alethea, almost analysing her movements; Amos was watching the both of them with that annoyingly calm expression he uses to remember things. What were they trying to work out? Yes, I was definitely missing something vital.

"Ok, upstairs," Kenneth said, proving that without words from him she wouldn't go. "You go up, and I'll be up in a minute."

She glanced at him, weary. Then she glanced to me, looking for some kind of reassurance. I wasn't sure what she would have seen on my expression, but the loathing glare from Kenneth told me it was the

opposite of helpful. I felt kind of bad that she was in the middle of all of this; but if it was enough to irritate my youngest brother, there wasn't a lot that could stop me from doing it.

Ignoring her clear reluctance of leaving him, she trudged up the stairs, dragging all of our eyes with her. I was the first to recover, and I looked to the others. Amos' had his features twisted into something that I could only read as considering, although knowing him it was probably much deeper than that. Kenneth's eyes swivelled to his and I looked back again.

"I don't think she likes you bro," I told him, staring after her. I heard his low growl and it satisfied me to know he saw it too. He would have been blind if he hadn't. Maybe there was more to it than I saw, but that didn't mean I couldn't see the obvious. Even in his growl I recognised his thoughts; he was almost protective of her; strange.

I couldn't help but smile. I knew that this wasn't the same tranquil smile I'd worn upstairs, this was mocking. What could he really expect after making

my life hell for years? Apasia had adored him, spoilt him even more because of his tantrums, while I got the back seat. I was the one who got scolded when I used my powers; no matter how justified I had been in doing so. It was just out of pity...

"Mate," Amos cautioned him. I looked at him then, and my lips curled playfully back, almost teasing. He knew he would loose if he did anything to me, and so did I. That didn't stop him from trying; and while he continued to try, I continued to enjoy it.

I blinked and my expression switched to shock as he straightened up from his crouched position and he turned away. He didn't glance at me again, so he didn't see that my mouth was slightly ajar or that my eyes were wide and surprised.

Amos shook his head as Kenneth looked at him. To anyone else, it probably would have seemed like a refusal; to me and my brother, it was a sign of bewilderment.

"I really don't know mate," he said in a defeated tone. "I mean, something must have happened - I know I barely saw her last time, but she's changed."

No-one paid me the slightest attention as I stood there, mouth agape and eyes flashing between them. There'd been a last time? So she been here before - but that never happened. Even with the rarity at which I stayed I knew Kenneth's girls stay clear of this house, and even the ones who were 'lucky' enough to see it didn't come back again, he got bored and changed prey before they got the chance.

She'd changed. My eyes were a chasm of confusion, and my expression was something I hadn't worn in years. As my hand came up to swipe my long hair back from my eyes, I didn't register the motion, I was already intrigued by the scene unfolding before me.

What could she have been like before? Amos had said she'd changed. I knew from even that brief encounter that there was no way she could have been as subdued or seduced as the others. So that meant she was different. How so?

Kenneth

"I mean, it might not have anything to do with you," he said, although I knew he doubted that. Lizzie

supported my theory, but when she scoffed I ignored her. "It could be something else."

"I know," I sighed. I was ninety-nine percent positive that it was me, especially as I had left far-too-small margins for it to be much else.

"You know, it's rude to talk about someone behind their back," Lizzie input. I ignored her again, barely even noticing that the tone she used was thoughtful, not playful, as it usually was.

"Anything could have happened," Amos contemplated. He trailed off into his own thoughts, although I was pretty sure most of them still involved what I could have done.

"I know," I said again.

He just looked at me. I had been banking on Amos being able to tell me something, but so far, that had failed. "I mean, mate, can you think of anything that might have done it?"

I know I didn't physically flinch, but it felt like that. There was no hesitation in my words and no catch in my tone, but that's what comes from growing up

around others with super senses and then having to act most hours of the day. "I can think of one thing."

I could think of only one thing that could have changed her like this, and I know my expression slipped when my accurate memory brought up her expression again. I had seen her terrified before, but of course only she would be able to be even more frightened when what I was doing didn't actually concern her. Only she could save that expression until her brother was involved. It was almost as if she knew it would stop me; and even just recovering the memory my stomach flipped to see it.

There weren't words to describe what I felt when her eyes met mine. I knew she wasn't conscious of the way her shaking hand covered her shoulder as she looked up, or of the rapid rises and falls of her chest with each panicked breath. All she knew was that I had done it, and than that I had gone. I knew that moving that fast had been reckless, but that if I had gone any slower it wouldn't have been the trees surrounding the darkened clearing that got in the way of my fist.

Amos snapped me back out of my distraction. "What? What happened?"

I shook my head, teeth gritted.

Lizzie tried to attract our attention then. She was so spoilt, expecting everyone's attention all of the time. "I bet he-"

Amos shot her a warning look, but I grabbed the chair beside me and lobbed it first. She just missed it, or so I thought. Forgetting everything else, I chuckled at the scrape on her arm. "Slow reactions sis."

She snarled at me.

I scoffed. "That for a scrape? I'll take the trade any day - it's totally worthwhile." I knew I was pushing my luck, but what harm could it really do me. Night wasn't that bad. Unless she was controlling it. Even that wasn't enough to falter my expression.

I was ready for it, but the encroaching darkness still stunned me. Even after so many returns to the endless black and emptiness around me, I couldn't get used to it. My ears popped and my eyes rolled

back into my head, not being able to see anything no matter where they were aimed.

I felt the hit of the ground on my knees as I sank to the floor. The smarting pulsed efficiently through my body, with no other feeling to distract my mind from it. I could see black. I could hear nothing. All I could feel was a heated surge of darkness moving through me. After entering this world so many times, I didn't gasp or shout. I knew my breaths would catch and falter, but I couldn't sense the halts.

I drew in a jagged breath and my eyes opened. I didn't let my lungs pull any more; I wouldn't give her the enjoyment of knowing the discomfort it still caused. I kept my burning eyes on hers as I straightened up, not sparing Amos a glance, although I knew his weary sight was fixed on me.

Out of everything that she could have as a name, she had night. I never used to think much of it, mean, obviously, her name would relate to her power somehow, but I never thought it would be this way. Night. It never really told me anything, and no-one

else picked anything up either. Recreating night shouldn't be so threatening.

The name Leila could go to anyone on the planet, and my sister gets it. She hated it so much that she changed it. I had changed mine too, but there was no way I could go around with the name Amasa, even if I did hate being similar to my sister in the hate of my name. After Amos let it slip this morning, I'd spun Alethea a story about how we'd all used fake names for school, telling her some rubbish about how we gave everyone a second name. It was technically true, and I doubted if it would be long before she had one too with the way Amos' mind worked.

I vaguely wondered if she knew what the name meant; burden bearer. That gave me no hint at all on what any power I could get would be, all it told me was that it would probably be something unwanted. Being the youngest also meant I was the last to find my 'ability'.

To think, I used to laugh about my name.

Diverted from my thoughts by a low snarl, I connected my gaze to Lizzie's. My eyes scraped down

to the measly scratch on her arm. That was a blow I'd waited long and hard to get. She glared at me for a brief moment, and I smiled. This was my normal smile. I had never noticed how tight it was until two days ago. Right now, tight and smug just seemed to fit. "Still worth it."

Her jaw flexed, as did her fist, but she didn't try it again. Her whole body was stiff and she turned and fled the room. The door slammed downstairs, and I took satisfaction in the speed at which she'd gone. She could always be fast, but she never went that fast unless she really needed to.

There was silence for a moment after she left, but Amos broke it, looking at me. "Whatever it was, it must have been something big."

I nodded and my eyes flicked to the ceiling. I realised how quickly that scene would have played out. It could only have been a moment or two to her. I sighed. "Can we talk about it later?"

"Yeah, sure," he replied. This may not be something I was looking forward to, but it was a reassurance I needed. I couldn't believe that I'd lost control like that

in the first place. The way things had been the other night seemed so far away, and with the absent face she gave me now, it didn't look as if anything like it would be coming my way again soon.

I rushed up the stairs, almost wishing this was over.

Alethea

Shadows; moving shadows.

My eyes flew open with one hurried blink. Part of me knew I should be frightened, but I didn't know why. I didn't bother to lift my head as I looked, once again, up to the patterned ceiling that was shrouded in darkness. I knew where I was; and I wasn't frightened. The shadow had only been a nightmare, and a strange one at that.

I tried to recall my nightmare, knowing that my heart had raced and my eyes had widened. I thought that something had happened, but all I could remember was the encasing shadow twisting around me; and that I couldn't get away. I remembered trying to get away, and I remembered the crushing feeling as I realised that I couldn't. The darkness of the shadow

encapsulated me. There was something about it, something I should know, but the memory wouldn't come.

I felt the slight stutter of my heart as my eyes adjusted to the dim room, but I already knew where I was, so there didn't seem to be a reason for it. I sat up and my eyes found the lamp in the corner again, silently pumping liquid up and down its tube; silently moving; silently continuing.

I shivered. The silence brought the soundless shadows into perspective, and I didn't have a problem recalling the fear as they entwined and moved around me. The black swirled through my mind, encasing my awoken thoughts in the same way it had held my sleeping mind.

My pulse only raced when the pouring light from the hallway intruded the room, casting a real, solid shadow across the ground. I almost jerked away, but the same fear that caused that reaction had frozen me in place. It was just a shadow, and the dream was just a dream.

"Are you alright?" Kenneth asked, his voice slightly weary.

I flicked my gaze downwards, embarrassed by my reaction. I shook my head slightly as I blinked to clear the thoughts. "I'm...yeah."

"Are you sure?" he asked after a pause.

It would have struck me that he sounded truly worried if I hadn't remembered at that moment exactly what had happened the previous day. Then I remembered that I wasn't meant to be giving him anything to fuss about; and I knew that the easiest way to so that was exactly what I had been doing before. He wants it, I do it; I want it, forget it. It wasn't the hardest solution of all to come to.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I told him, still looking downwards as I tried to direct my thoughts away from the slinking shadows crossing my mind. He stiffened slightly, although the only change to the atmosphere was the distance in my voice. Maybe it was enough to make him think.

Routinely, my eyes jumped to my watch. I didn't register the time at first and it took a few silent seconds for me to read it right. I stood quickly when it finally hit. "I've got to get home."

Kenneth stared at me for a moment. His voice was completely uncaring when he answered, and any recollection of the worry in his tone from moments before was dashed. "No you don't."

I stared back at him. "Yes, I do."

"No you don't," he repeated, not lifting his serene gaze from mine.

"Kenneth - I need to get home," I told him simply.

"Why?"

"Because I have parents who gave me a curfew which I'm going to be breaking in fifteen minutes," I told him. I'd never had to pay attention to my curfew before, I'd always be in on time. Then again, I usually had to be home for Charlie then.

"Parents who are off staying in some expensive hotel," he reminded me.

"True," I consented. "But that doesn't mean I can be out. It's nearly eleven in case you didn't notice, and I-"

I stopped. This was exactly the opposite of what I was supposed to be doing, and I knew he would win the argument anyway. My parents would probably never know, and even if they did find out, that would mean I was grounded; which was certainly one way out of all of this.

"And you?" he hinted. I shook my head and heard his heavy sigh. "If you're really that bothered..."

"No, it's fine," I said, unsure of where the words were coming from. It didn't help anything to have his subtle reminder of how much money he had paid for my parents' trip, whether he intended that or not. "It doesn't matter."

I didn't let my eyes skate over to his to judge his expression. I was expecting some sarcastic comment, but when it didn't come I just relaxed into the silence. The lack of conversation didn't bother me, not when my mind had enough to occupy it already.

I could feel his eyes on me. I felt slightly uncomfortable to know the intensity of the stare he was unleashing on me, but that didn't hold my attention for long. It didn't take more than a minute's silence for my thoughts to wander aimlessly back to the sneaking shadows.

"Maybe I should get you back," he said eventually. My eyes jumped to his. His tone sounded slightly off, and I made sure to keep the surprise out of my expression. I couldn't exactly object to that decision, but it did seem odd that he'd accepted it so quickly after he'd said no.

Kenneth

It didn't take long before I was heading back home again. I ignored the strange pull that told me to stay on the basis that it was completely unnecessary and irrelevant. I shouldn't not want to leave her like I did.

I slowed down before I reached the house, not entirely sure that I wanted to enter the tense atmosphere that must exist inside. I could easily hear that Lizzie was still there, and after the 'fight' this morning I expected her to be in a worse mood than

normal. Amos wasn't going to be upset with me. That didn't mean that the moments I connected my eyes to his wouldn't hurt though.

I came to a complete stop for a full three seconds before I shot off into the forest. No-one inside paused what they were doing, so my redirection went by completely undiscovered. I vaguely wondered what the others would make of it if they had sensed my aversion to their presence, but I couldn't convince myself that I really cared. The only thoughts that stayed constant in my mind were those of the girl I'd just left.

Why was my mind so susceptible? This had never happened before, so the moment one ounce of difference comes along, I couldn't turn away. That was almost physically true, when I'd left her, despite knowing where she was and that she was safe; I didn't want to go. With a sharp hit to my stomach, I realised that she wasn't only home; she was alone tonight. This morning I was almost joyous with the arrangement. Now I wasn't so sure. I shook my head,

closing my eyes to clear my mind as I slowed again. This was wrong.

Immediately a new flood of thoughts filled my mind. They were still Alethea, but they weren't edged with longing. This time, I was trying to work out what she could possibly have been thinking today.

She was almost lifeless. She moved, spoke and followed, but she didn't seem to need it. It was as though the actions were more from habit or necessity than actual want. I couldn't imagine what she was thinking. She refused to like anything, that much was clear. She didn't ask for anything, almost as though she was second in what was going on. That was exactly the opposite of what things were for me. She was everything at the moment.

She seemed so determined not to like anything. It seemed like a waste of time really; if she didn't want to hate everything so much, then there wouldn't be a problem, but seeing as she did, it only made everything harder for herself. It was strange, she'd never really struck me as the pessimistic type.

I didn't realise I'd sped up. I hadn't notice my change in direction. I barely even considered the booming sounds that were starting to echo around me. It was only when my running figure broke the edge of the trees I noticed anything; the sudden glitters of the stars above me catching my attention. I pulled myself to a stop, hoping rather than checking that I wasn't within view of anyone else.

No, I told myself as I forced my body to turn and set off stiffly back to the trees. No. in the morning, I'd find some way to make it up to her; and one way or another I would break through that shell of hers. Whatever it took, I'd get back to her again. Her, not the role she was playing. As for now...

She'll be alright for one night.

Diana

He left. Finally.

I still didn't leave my crevasse, still stayed in my sanctuary. I watched her, thinking. I saw the way that her guarded eyes followed him, and didn't look away after he was out of sight. I saw the beginning of her

shakes although I doubt if she sensed them. I only revealed myself once she'd sunk to her knees, the silence circling her drawing me closer.

She hadn't even had the strength to make it to the lounge. Here I was, having watched her for near the entire day, not a crack in her act, not a flaw in her mask; but now that he was gone she was falling to pieces. She didn't want him here, so why was she only like this when he left? As the tears poured soundlessly down her face, I could see it had taken more than it had seemed for her to stay together that long.

Her eyes turned to me as I pawed her leg. She had one white hand on the fierce ground, holding her up as she continued to shudder, but the other fell over me. She pulled me close.

"Di," she whispered, closing her eyes. "Oh, Di, I can't do this."

I just rubbed my head against hers, and she smiled slightly as the tickle of fur. She pushed herself around and used both of her arms to cradle me. I mewed lightly in her ear as she stroked me and held me;

giving me more comfort that I needed, and asking for more than I could give.

"I have to do this," she said. "I have to."

Her voice cracked, but the falling tears were still silent. She still didn't catch her breaths or break her words. I snuggled in close to her, realising how cool she was. It was almost unnatural, but so was he. This was his fault, all of it. It was all him. How could she even be near him if he did this?

"I have to," she repeated. "But I don't think I can. Oh Di."

Her eyes were dark, protected. As I watched, that defence seeped away and I was left with a clear window to her thoughts; her pained, hollow thoughts. She buried her face in my short fur, ruffling it as she did so. The slightest sound escaped her lips, but she held the rest back.

She straightened up slightly where she sat, but didn't loosen her hold on me. It wasn't uncomfortable. In fact, I missed the times when she used to hold me

this close; the times when she'd laugh and smile. Not now. That was all before him.

One hand pulled back from my body and she pushed her hair behind her ear. She almost smiled for a second, and pushed a shaky laugh through her lips. "I suppose you think I'm silly. Falling apart like this."

I mewed quietly again, but even to her the disagreement must have been clear. I think it was, and she smiled again, the tears in her eyes retreating just slightly when she did. She shouldn't be alone; not tonight.

Alethea

I awoke to the sound of silence. There was nothing that should have woken me; no sound to stir, not light to see, no nightmare to forget; but I awoke all the same. My eyes just flickered open without warning or wanting, and I was left with a raging heart and a dimmed sight. With one quick snap of the light, I saw it was exactly one hour past midnight.

Diana was curled up on the pillow beside me. I looked up to the ceiling and noticed the stiffness of

my eyes. Then I remembered why it was like that. Dried tears were still clearly on my face, but I didn't rub my eyes to get rid of them. I rested my cold hand on Diana's black fur, trying to remember how I used to do that before it all; trying to imagine things were still like that. For a moment, I considered faking a nightmare and going to talk to my parents; but they were currently celebrating their honeymoon up in London. Any other night, I would have been able to go and see Charlie. If he was awake, he'd be hyper and happy, letting me forget everything I wanted to. If he was asleep, I'd just watch him, and I'd forget everything anyway. It figured that the thing I was trying to forget was the reason he wasn't here.

I sighed into the darkness, listening to the silence of the house. There should be water running, or a light flicking, or someone's heavy breathing entreating on the quiet time. Not tonight. Tonight, I was alone. I had Diana beside me, but I realised that she could never know how much of a comfort she was to me right now.

I glanced at Diana, soundlessly asleep beside me. Moving gently so that I didn't disturb her, I pulled the duvet over me back, and slid out of the bed. The thickness of my bedroom carpet was enough to obscure the coolness of it, and I wrapped my dressing gown around me. Diana didn't stir.

I noticed how sore my movements were, making them stiff. The worst part was my shoulder, but I tried not to think about that. Even so, I couldn't resist slipping across the hall and pulling the sleeve off of my shoulder to check it. My mind hummed when I saw that, a mental way to defend it from registering how bad it looked. That didn't work for long.

I hadn't wanted him. Then I hadn't stopped thinking about him. I'd told myself again and again that the reason I was thinking about him was because I was cautious, not because I was thinking about him being anywhere near what everyone else saw him as. I wasn't pretending he was perfect, I was being weary; I knew he wasn't perfect. The proof of that was staring at me in the glossy mirror.

Ignoring the state of the air around me, I pulled the whole dressing gown off, and looked again that the bruises on both my arms from his holds on me. I tried to tell myself that if I hadn't refused him in the first place it wouldn't have happened; but there was only so much I could do. They were healing; there were slow, but healing.

That was exactly why I had to do what he said. The more I refused, the more it would hurt; the worse I would come off. Then there would be questions. Probably from friends at first, people like Lucy, who didn't know anything about Kenneth and didn't realise how lucky I was that I could get away from him even for a little bit. Then those would carry to my parents. Then my parents would worry, and that was something I didn't need. They'd try and sort this out, probably making things worse in the progress, and then they'd never trust me again because I hadn't told them.

I think that worst part of it was that I knew the worst, the freshest mark, hadn't been meant for me. But if he'd touched Charlie...

I took a deep breath. That was why Charlie was gone. That was why I was doing exactly what he said, without protests. That was why I was sure this was going to end soon. His longest stay with any one girl was two weeks; so I only had to get to Wednesday. Tomorrow, the day after and the day after, I could probably get through. I had school for half the day, minimising the time I spent with him. Today, however, was something else.

There was no way I was ever going to get to sleep now, so I shrugged the dressing gown on and headed down to the lounge. I aimed my gaze downward when I turned on the light, waiting for my eyes to adjust. I grabbed a book off of the shelf and started reading.

The rain was a slantwise curtain across the dingy street...

Amos

"I wonder where he is," Lizzie contemplated. I looked at her, search her expression for anything other than the concern in her tone.

"He's probably just out," I told her. "He's fine."

"You don't know that," she countered. "For all you know-"

"Is that a maternal spike kicking in?" I asked, knowing it would shut her up, whether or not it was true. Admittedly, Kenneth had been gone quite a while, but knowing him he was just running. He'd have to come back soon, I assumed. Either that or he wouldn't bother; but it wasn't unheard of for him to vanish for the night. I had enough raging around my mind without Lizzie's endless conversation adding to it.

"No!" she answered immediately. "It's just..."

"Just what?" I inquired after her sentence trailed off. There was ring to her tone, but I couldn't quite work out what it was. Her eyes were far away, but they focused on me when she spoke again.

"I want to know what's going on," she told me simply.

"I don't know what you mean," I said, although I had a hunch. She raised and eyebrow.

"You know exactly what I mean," she stated. "You saw the way he was today, and I want to know why. That's not him."

"So this is a maternal thing?" I guessed, trying to sway the conversation.

"This is not," she informed me. "And don't change the subject. I want to know what's going on."

"It's not mine to tell," I told her.

She scoffed. "Well, I doubt if Am - Kenneth's going to tell me."

I smiled slightly. It was good to see she was making an effort to placate him at least. Here she was, commenting that he's changed; I don't think she realised how different she was after her 'little' trip. I suppose, just because you stop aging doesn't mean you stop changing.

"And I want answers," she concluded. "I need to know what's going on, and if that means I have to find out from Alethea, then-"

"You wouldn't do that," I hoped.

"I would if no-one will tell me," she said coldly.

"She doesn't even know half of what's happening," I told her. "She's just..."

"But I doubt if I know even the half she does."

"True," I accepted. "But I still shouldn't say."

"Just tell me something, I'm staying here too, I have a right to know." I don't think she notice how needy her tone was. I hoped she didn't use that around Kenneth; the slightest sign of vulnerability from either of them would have them at their throats.

"There really isn't much to say," I told her simply. "Kenneth is just...paranoid about the way Alethea's acting."

"Why? He'll have someone else in a few days, everyone knows that. Including him. She can go back to however she was before as soon as he's done with her, no damage done."

"I don't know," I said. "I mean, this looks lasting."

She scoffed, a reflex after patronising him for so long. "Lasting? Kenneth? You are not trying to put those together, are you? Those two things just don't mix."

"That's what I thought," I told her. "This is different."

"Maybe," she accepted. "But I still doubt if he'll stay with her more than a week. Even you must think that."

"It's already been a week," I informed her. Her mocking expression froze for a second, and she became serious.

"You are joking?" I shook my head. "Ok. So, why? He barely ever goes that long, and besides, she clearly hates it, and he hates that she hates it, but he's never..."

"That's exactly the loop I'm stuck in," I told her. "There's got to be more than that, but aside from the fact that he hates to think anyone can get the better of him, I can't think of a reason. He was fine before it all."

"He's coming," she said. I listened; she was right. "I'm going to go - you tell me more later, ok?"

I didn't reply, realising just how much I had already said. The spark in hers eyes was something different. I hadn't seen it there before, not to this magnitude; and certainly not about Kenneth. I glanced at my watch. He wouldn't be here long, and I was sure Lizzie's 'later' meant as soon as he left again. He was always up early, and seeing as it was already seven, he was probably just stopping for a minute or two. She was poised to leave, but clinging to my answer as though she was crucial. Even if she didn't realise it, she could help work this all out...

I nodded and she dashed from the room.

Alethea

I closed the book. That was...extremely random. Maybe next time I'd find out what a book is about before I read it, just so that I get a basic idea and don't get carted off to some far away land. Although it was a nice change from reality. I got so far into it that it just didn't seem right to come back to the real world now.

As the doorbell rang, I knew my brief attempt at escape was over. I put the book back on the shelf,

and, wishing with everything I could that it wasn't the person I thought it was, went to open the door. In the real world, I reminded myself when my wish proved false, wishes don't come true. There isn't a supply of magic waiting on your every command. Even it the book it had made it clear that it was a different world, but I still found myself thinking...

"Yes alright, I'm up late," I told him, stepping out of the way. He just gave me a strange look, but with the way his eyes had scrapped my outfit I wasn't sure he could expect much less.

"Did I say anything?" he inquired.

I raised an eyebrow, but closed the door after him and turned to head upstairs. Given, he didn't say anything; but I didn't expect that to hold for long. I was right.

"Look at me," he said. I froze for a second, my hand hovering over the stair's banister. He didn't say anything else. I didn't let myself glance back at him when I spoke, and managed to stop the shake in my voice.

"Why?"

This had been an explicit order, a proper instruction. That didn't usually happen; and I was worried about whatever made the difference. He didn't answer the question, but his voice was different. it wasn't harsh or low the way I knew it; it was almost curious.

"Just...look at me."

I turned back hesitantly, not moving closer to him and training my eyes on the ground. In the moment they flicked up, his gaze was focused on them and I couldn't look away.

I wanted to understand what I saw in the swirling sapphire that was focused so intently upon me. I wanted to know what he was thinking. I wanted to believe that I didn't imagine what I saw there. I wanted a lot, but none of it came.

My mind went totally blank as he looked at me. Wishes don't come true, I reminded myself. I still found every cell in my body wishing that the care I saw in his eyes was more than imaginary; there was still no way to stop the hopes that the concern I saw

was genuine; and I still couldn't find a reason to want to look away from him.

I was still a few steps above him, but the sense that was telling me to move forward was pushing me towards him. I tried to tell myself that I didn't want to be beside him. But I did. It was only a few small steps. The look in his eyes eliminated the distance anyway. I wanted what I saw to be true; I prayed that what I thought I saw was real - that there was no way fro it to be false. I wanted him.

I shouldn't, a feeble voice in my mind protested. I didn't want him. But I did. This is what he did to girls; all of the girls he'd ever been with. I knew that. So I should be able to stop it happening to me. So why was it happening?

No - why did I want it to happen?

Kenneth

There was something. I knew she didn't look right at that first glance. It wasn't that she was up late, as she'd said; it was that she hadn't slept. I wanted to know why, but she clearly wasn't going to answer.

The defence in her eyes melted away for a moment; but I wasn't sure what I was seeing. I couldn't be imagining what I saw there, could I?

She wanted answers. She wanted understanding. So did I. The only thing that I wanted explaining, was why I wanted what she wanted more than anything else; why, if she truly were to ask, I would tell her everything. I shouldn't, and I knew that; but if she wanted it so much, I couldn't not tell her.

If I told her...

It couldn't happen. So why did I feel so venerable? I had kept the secret for long enough; I had never needed to tell anyone, never wanted to tell anyone; no-one had ever had a reason to want to know. They'd all been too smitten to care...But this was Alethea; and she was different to anyone else.

I knew why her steady heartbeats worried me. I knew she should be terrified; of what I was, of what I did, of what I could do. But she wasn't. She was just different. The serenity I saw in her shouldn't scare me, but it seemed so wrong. I'd seen trust plenty of times before in the eyes of endless girls; but I knew

that this trust wasn't from fantasy or from dreams; this was truly her, and what she really felt.

She honestly felt the longing I saw. The confusion I recognised coursed through her veins. The devotion I had seen before was there, heavy and real; it was just hovering at the edges, not pronouncing a presence. As I looked up to her, she looked back. There was nothing in the world aside from us two.

Then she blinked.

It was all gone; everything - all hidden again. Everything I had just seen was shrouded by her defence. She looked down on me, and the tension returned unconsciously to her stance. I tried not to react to the change, but part of me knew I didn't quite manage it. Knowing what was there and that it was hidden only made me felt far away; made everything seem distant.

Her eyes flicked down for a second, and I felt the jolt as they turned so easily away from me. After another few seconds, they passed swiftly over me as she turned away again. I don't know if she felt my eyes on her, but she was unable to keep her pace steady

and I noticed the rush just before she escaped my sight.

Alethea

I didn't want this. I didn't want this. It was so easy to lie to myself when I wasn't looking at him. When all I could see was my hollow reflection, I could lie to myself about anything. Well, almost anything. It was impossible to completely ignore the knowledge that he was downstairs, waiting for me, and that part of me wanted to go back to him.

Everything logical told me I didn't want him; told me to stay away from him; to go and not come back. I hadn't had a choice in this, but I did have a choice about how I felt about it. That didn't make it any easier. I looked at the empty sheen in my eyes. It only looked empty for a second. I blinked, and it transformed to a window into everything I was thinking. I blinked again and erased it. I just had to make sure I only kept one view open to Kenneth.

This shouldn't be so hard. Everyone else was too in love with him to care about anything; and I detested them for it, but maybe that was the easy way out.

Maybe I was just too stupid to realise that trying to avoid it hurt much more than simply believing it. Perhaps I wasn't smarter, as I originally thought. Maybe I was different, but my understanding only made things worse. I thought all of those girls were being ridiculous when I saw how they were around him, but wasn't it possible that they knew something I didn't? I could see it would be easier if I wasn't trying to keep the emotions out of this; now. Maybe they just saw it before me. Maybe it was better just to put up with it and enjoy it while I could.

But I knew I couldn't do that. Having seen what it - what he - did to everyone he'd ever even spoken too, I simply could just let things go. I couldn't forget what I had seen him do; I would never be able to ignore what I knew could happen to me; and there wasn't a way to erase Miranda's expression when he hadn't been there.

Miranda. There was no way I'd ever be able to make this up to her. It didn't matter that I didn't want him, in her eyes, this was my fault. That would never change. And I didn't want him.

Why did I need to reassure myself of that? Anytime up until the last week, if I'd heard Kenneth's name I would have cringed; right now, part of me was soothed to know it was me he was waiting for. I knew it was wrong; I knew I didn't want to want it, but there didn't seem to be anything I could do.

Kenneth Edwards was waiting for me. That shouldn't give me the lift it did. Those words should play my pulse in the race it began. The statement shouldn't be something I was calmed to hear. But I was.

A single tear started to trace its way down my cheek. Even that felt wrong. It felt wrong to want him. It was almost impossible not to. I couldn't feel wrong to want him; even though everything I'd ever heard and thought told me I should.

He had me away from Charlie; had Diana weary and tense; had me terrified of any kind of socialising. Yet I owed him so much for my parents. Remembering that only made me think of his soft smile; the one I had seen that evening and the one I was sure no-one else had seen. I knew none of his other girls had seen that. Why did he have to do that? Why couldn't he

just be horrible and harsh and arrogant just like I thought he'd be? Then he could just move on, and everyone would be happy. Then none of this would have happened. At least if he was like that I could understand him. If he was like that, I would have a reason not to want him around.

I grabbed the flannel from the sink and scrubbed furiously at my face, trying to get rid of what I saw there - of the weakness and venerability. I was so naïve to think I could get away from this and wait it out. Everything was changing; and the worst part was, I couldn't find it in me to want it all to stop. I didn't want him to go; no matter how much I told myself that I did. The plain emotion that wanted him near; the strong, pulsing one coursing through my veins; wasn't going to stop because of a few worries. Sure, I might turn out the way everyone else had; but there was always a chance. People are always different, maybe there was enough of a difference in me to change what I'd seen.

And that was probably exactly what every other girl he'd ever looked at thought. I wanted him, but I knew

it would hurt. But I wanted him so badly that I was imagining that he wanted me too, and when I imagined that, everything else got lost and I almost believed that he wouldn't do that to me. I didn't only believe it; I wanted to believe it.

My whole world was shattering thanks to one guy.

Jo

"You two!" I said, again, watching the mess before me unfold. I knew I would be the one clearing up, but it was only the back garden and it was so funny to see. I supposed I'd better make sure I gave Charlie a quick wash later, I couldn't exactly have Alethea some to pick him up when he was coated in mud.

He'd suddenly become so mischievous, it was almost impossible to believe. Over the last week alone, I knew he'd changed; and changed and awful lot. I personally found it hilarious; but I suppose, when I know he's going back home after a few days, it's not so bad. Harry and Susan had their work cut out for them with him now.

I wondered what had changed to make him this way. Watching him with Jack, I could easily see which of them was more daring, although it hadn't been that way last month. They'd almost switched; Jack had calmed down just in time to see Charlie's rebellious streak.

"Hey love," said a voice behind me. I jumped up.

"God! Jerry, don't do that!" I scolded, but I was laughing. He wrapped an arm around me and pulled me in for a kiss. At first, he was gentle; longing. Then he got fiercer. He was almost holding me up, and I knew that in a second it would be over. He was breathless when he pulled back, just as energised as me; but he'd been cooped up in an office all day whereas I was running after the troublesome pair across the lawn. It was always the same with Jerry; cautious at first, but longing after.

He smirked. "How was your day?"

"Hectic," I told him, straightening up but not pushing him away. I kissed him again, but only briefly this time. "Yours?"

"Tiring," he told me.

Jack shrieked for his dad and we parted, although I didn't feel the need to take my eyes off of him; off of either of them. You could clearly see they were family. I wasn't sure if it was the thick black curls or the dimples that did it, but the resemblance was there. And Jack had my walnut eyes in the same way that Charlie had Susan's blue ones. The only difference I saw was the way Charlie's sparked, whilst Susan kept her emotions concealed. She couldn't keep the light out of them when she looked at Charlie or Alethea though. I wondered if it was the same with me when I looked at Jack. I hoped it was.

Kenneth

"Charlie," she remembered.

I took that as my cue to leave. I couldn't explain how she looked, I could only see the motherly side of her that announced its presence at the mention of her brother. My voice was completely emotionless as I took my leave.

"Right. Tomorrow then."

She only nodded, keeping her gaze down and her head tilted so that her hair obscured her face from my vision. I was so tempted to reach out and turn it up to me; but that was something I couldn't do. I'd seen into her mind once today, asking for more was pushing my luck.

I moved in silence. Even after the door clicked behind me I didn't hear her move. I didn't hear a sound from her, encased in her own thoughts as she was. She had been defended and protected for the whole day. I hadn't seen anything more; but I wanted to. The only thing I wanted more was to know the reason behind the defence. I had to know.

I didn't have the care to quicken my pace. I was in no hurry to return to the prison I called a home, not with my unbearable sister snooping ruthlessly around. The distance she'd given me worried me more than her closeness, it made me think there was some devious reason behind it. I heard her departure this morning. Thinking of her as I did, the obvious answer told me she was planning something to do with Alethea. If she so much as touched her...

Alethea couldn't hide everything she thought. She almost did, but not quite - every so often a slight emotion would flicker onto her expression. It just didn't last long enough for me to see; and that was really saying something. She probably wasn't even aware of these flashes and glimpses she gave.

I hadn't been able to watch her sleep. She looked so fragile, it just seemed wrong. Instead, my attention had turned to anything and everything inconsequential; including Diana. How could the glare of a cat have hardened to such an accusing gaze in such a short time? From distaste to disgust; almost as though this was my fault. Maybe it was. I wasn't going to leave her like this though. I was going to find out what she was thinking; one way or another.

I needed an answer. Somehow, I would get one. I had to have an answer; had to know why she was like this. I didn't want to hurt her to get an answer, but if that was what it took...I knew it would be better in the long run.

When I spoke to her, I couldn't put anything into my voice. It was as though it had all vanished with the

secrets she concealed. There was nothing I could say or think that would explain it; but it was there.

It was strange. Before, anything I didn't know would infuriate me. If I didn't understand it, it couldn't be worth it. So why was the person I could get out of my mind the sole thing in the universe I didn't understand at this moment? I never thought difference could cause such change...

Alethea

The trip home from school was silent. The day at school had been encased in a cave of non-communication, only my slight chance to speak with a frantic Lucy changing that. When we got home, we were greeted by silence and an abandoned building.

I didn't want this; and I wasn't going to let it happen. I wasn't going to get pulled in. This wasn't going to shatter me.

Now, clothes changed, bag upstairs and caution refreshed and stretching, I was tensed in my lounge, waiting for his trigger; his sneer comment or inevitable question. All Kenneth did was stare,

watching me with those gorgeously trapping and sapphire eyes, waiting for some sign of openness of weakness. He received neither, and I avoided his eyes at all cost, afraid of what might slip if I really saw them.

"For goodness sake, what is the matter?" he finally asked, sounding bored. That just showed how little he cared about his fixations. I didn't look at him, keeping my trained gaze upon the soft carpet.

I couldn't feel his eyes on me and I shook my head. It wasn't a proper answer to his question, but I wasn't going to explain it all; especially when the thoughts were pitifully obvious and spitefully painful.

"Alethea," he cautioned. His tone told me to answer, but my mind told me different. I wasn't going to open up to him. The stress was really beginning to pile up and I felt the first traces of appearing tears around my eyes. And I knew he wouldn't like that.

I didn't even know why I was crying. I supposed it was that the helplessness of what was going on had finally got back to me. The less I thought about it, the

easier it was to ignore; so now that I'd heard the initial thoughts, it was all hitting me.

"Christ," he muttered uncaringly, before raising his voice for me to hear. "I honestly don't see what your problem is."

"No kidding," I murmured, more for myself than him, but he heard the comment anyway. The tears were retreating slightly.

"Go on then," he suggested harshly. "Get it off your chest - maybe, if once in a while you actually said something, I might know what it is."

I shook my head once, pulling a jagged breath through my teeth. He rolled his eyes and leant back, completely relaxed in his chair, finishing the movement with another sigh. At least he'd finally got past expecting an explanation.

He scoffed, almost as if he'd heard the thought. "You know, maybe if you didn't try to hate everything, you'd feel a bit better."

There was a moment of silence.

Then I exploded. "You terrify my cat, traumatise my brother, my best friend hates me and may never speak to me again! I bet you don't even realise how much it hurt her when you weren't there, let alone what it did to see you move straight on to me. The time that she really needs a friend, and you just pull me away - threatening to hurt both her and me even more if I don't go along with it!"

I hadn't realised that my eyes had jumped to his, but I had to look away from him, and my angry gaze got directed at the plants out the window as I tried to organise my scattered thoughts. When I spoke again, my words were controlled, but it was impossible to miss the tone they took on.

"You don't even see what it's like," I told him. "You stay with a girl for a week, then you move on. You think that's fine and it's all done and dusted - has it never occurred to you, that some of them want to stay with you? Miranda was one of them, and you just threw her away. Then, out of every girl in the entire school - you pick the one who doesn't want anything to do with you to obsess with!" I tried to

blink the tears away, but it didn't work and they soon overflowed.

"You don't want anything to do with me," he repeated. It wasn't a question, nor was it an approval. I didn't have to look at him; the tone that he used was enough to tell me what he was thinking.

"I don't," I began, still looking to the carpet. "I don't want to be..."

"To be what?" he asked, using the one tone I'd heard plenty of in the past week. I knew he hated not hearing the end of statements. I wondered vaguely what he would do if he was faced with someone exactly like him. I just shook my head again.

I saw a few tears hit the floor. I couldn't move to wipe them away, and my attempts at halting them failed. I didn't dare raise my gaze. My throat was knotted, my mind tied, and my eyes streaming. I had my hands in fists at my sides, but I couldn't feel it as my nails dug into my palms and my fingers ached from the tension.

"Alethea," he said again. I'd already learnt that he only used my name as a warning. I knew what I didn't want to be left to, but I couldn't put it into words. I shook my head again, only feeling worse for saying everything out loud. He repeated my name once more, and I knew from the texture of it that it was my last chance. I couldn't find it in me to care.

He moved. He was stiff, but I recognised the motion it was preparing him for. My eyes leapt to his. For an imaginable second, I actually thought he seemed reluctant at the chance of violence.

"Go on," I suddenly yelled at him. "Do it!"

He stepped back slightly, but the movement was rigid. His whole body was tensed, and I saw the fury in his eyes fighting alongside my compelling suggestion. I didn't know why he didn't just do it. He'd hit me before. He was practically frozen.

"But before you do," I said, my voice at a normal volume, but heavy with a hard, distraught tone that wasn't mine. "Just answer me one question."

He didn't move, or show that he'd heard me. I'd given him enough of that treatment to know he was hanging on to the next word, waiting to hear what it was.

"Do you honestly think that I want this? That I want to know that every single second I spend with you is building up to nothing more than another let down? Trust me Kenneth, I've seen enough of you to know that in a week or so, you'll be on to someone completely different. Even you know it. In one week, you'll have another girl's name to threaten."

He still said nothing.

"Just answer me this," I told him. "What the hell do you expect me to do when you move on to your next phase?"

As soon as I said it I regretted it. Hearing it out loud only made it seem more real, and that made the prospect even worse. I was just waiting now. He was either going to shout, or he was going to hit me; I had my bets on the second.

"Go on," I repeated, my voice low and detached.

My Dad's car pulled up out the front of the house and I glanced out the window as I heard the gravel of the drive crunching. I looked back to Kenneth, the tears in my eyes returned but patient.

"Whatever you do decide to do," I told him, my voice cracking. "Do me a favour, and sort it out later - when my parents aren't around."

My timing was off as I turned away. I meant to be up the stairs before the house key even touched the lock, but I knew my Dad saw my face just before I sprinted up the stairs. Even Charlie's smile faded for a second as I ran.

I threw myself onto the bed, my door slamming audibly behind me. The silence I expected to hear didn't come; it was halted by the sounds of my finally released sobs ripping from my chest.

Chapter 5

Blood Stained Ruby Part 5

A Dream Of A Nightmare

Alethea

It didn't take long for me to hear the other sounds around me as well. I heard my Dad's raised voice downstairs, but the aggressive reply I'd learnt to expect didn't accompany it. Whatever Kenneth was going to do, at least he'd listened to me and was going to punish me later. I didn't hear a sound from him as he left, only my Dad's yells carrying up the stairs. I prayed that that meant Kenneth didn't make a sound.

Shortly after, my dad did what anyone could expect him to do, and came up to check on me. I couldn't

bear to lift my face from the shadowed protection of my weak arms, and failed to quieten the sharp gasps and breaths that sounded from my lips. I heard his hesitation; he didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to do.

I had finally given over to him. After my aversion and my protest; my resistance and my withdrawal; I'd said it. And as I said it, I accepted it. I didn't want any of this; I never had, but there was no was for me to get away from it. I was stuck with this until he moved on. He didn't like the idea of him sparing his time for you, and then you didn't care for him. Just because I didn't want something, didn't mean it wouldn't happen.

"Honey," my dad said softly, moving beside me and closing the door behind him. "Come on love, you're alright."

My sobs died away, but I could still hear the jagged edge to my breaths and pants as the tears streaked into the pillow before me. He sat beside me, his presence comforting me more than any words could. Even so, hearing his familiar tone softened my tears.

"Love, come on, you're alright," he tried to assure me. "Now, honey, tell your old man what happened."

I shook my head, grateful that my hair fell forwards to obscure my expression. My breaths raced again at the movement. I didn't open my eyes, the soothing of the nothingness I saw immeasurable against what I knew I could be facing.

"There, there, love. You're alright. You're ok." Dad's constant whispers wrapped around me, adding at least a little confidence and assurance to the confusion I felt. His gentle words skimmed over and around me, almost a barrier of protection against anything else. It couldn't stop the things that were already inside me though.

I heard Charlie outside. He whimpered, crushing my heart further. Dad looked towards the door.

"Don't let him in here," I said quickly, lifting my head slightly to make myself heard. Even so, the tone my voice took was unrecognisable. Charlie's mood was so easily influenced, and I didn't need my bad luck bringing him down. Charlie made a noise outside. I buried my head again.

"Come on hon, you're ok," Dad repeated soothingly. I trusted my Dad so much, but I had no idea if he was right or not. He rubbed my back lightly and Charlie started bawling outside.

"Dad, go sort him out," I said into the pillow. He hesitated, but both of us knew that having Charlie crying was not going to help anything. I knew that having my dad seeing me like this was unlikely to help anything, but aside from Charlie, I couldn't think of anything that would get me to tell him to go. So it had to be Charlie who needed the attention. "Go Dad."

He didn't want to; that much was clear, but as the silenced tears continued to run, he accepted that he couldn't do anything. I already knew that, but it was still painful when he left. I buried my head further, spots of white appearing in the blackness of my eyelids as I push them harder with the heals of my hands. My chest heaved off of the bed with every breath, but I couldn't stop that. My hands retreated, and the lightless black once again engulfed my sight.

So I was left to my own shattered thoughts as the day wore on.

"Oh sweetie, what happened?"

I just shook my head and buried my face childishly into her shoulder. I didn't want to have to face up to this. I didn't want anything to do with it and now look where it put me; in tears in my mum's arms.

"Oh honey," she murmured. She held me tight and brushed my hair back, away from my eyes. "Honey listen to me. You're alright, love. Just tell me what happened."

I didn't say anything; unsure that I could even if I tried. This hadn't happened to me in years; I'd thought I'd grown out of this sort of thing. Apparently I was wrong. I couldn't tell her. I didn't even understand why I was acting this way. I guess I just could believe that after everything I'd thought about those girls I'd seen, I was turning into one of them. Not only had I seen my best friends go through this; I now had to watch as my own reflection changed and twisted to him. I'd thought - I'd hoped - that knowing what he could do would be a comfort;

would change things. All I'd done was proven how wrong that hope was.

"Ok hon, ok," she murmured.

Kenneth

Even in the daylight my clearing in the forest was a relaxing place. The liveliness of the animals and creatures around had died away upon my approach, and I heard and felt a few daring stirs in the air around me as I continued my statue like state. The thickness of the trees around me made it almost impossible for the beaming sun to penetrate the darkness.

The black around me seemed to move. I knew that everything near me was as stationary as I remained; but I could almost see laps of darker shades and tints crawling amongst the colourless space.

She was wrong. I did see it. I knew what happened once the girls became a bore to me and outstayed their welcome. Well, I did now that I'd thought about it. I'd seen it countless time before, but I had pushed it to the back of my mind. It wasn't something I could

afford to consider. I saw what I did; I just didn't allow my mind to focus on that side of things for long.

I couldn't get her expression out of my mind. Even when I closed my eyes I saw her face burned on the inside of my eyelids. And her voice. When she said what she'd been trying to hide. It wasn't an obsession. Or, it hadn't been. Now I wasn't so sure. But even without seeing everything that I already had in her it was clear what she said was a lie. Even if she wasn't the same as everyone else; to tell me that she wanted nothing to do with me wasn't true. I didn't know if it had always been that way, but definitely now I knew it had changed.

I groaned in frustration and the shadowing oak shuddered when my fist collided with its trunk. Even then she'd managed to hide something. I still didn't know what she truly wanted, but I wasn't going to leave her like that. She didn't want something she feared; but that could be anything of a million things.

I knew I should be it that category. I should be something she feared. Even if she did; I knew it wasn't for the right reasons. Part of me wanted those

reason to be known; I wanted her to be scared, but not of something so trivial. I wanted her to know why she should hate me, and why I couldn't quite comprehend it when she did. If she hated me, I could understand; but she didn't. I'd seen that much. Even if I didn't know what she was scared of, I knew that she wasn't terrified of what I was.

She didn't stop confusing me. It didn't matter that she knew what I could do; or at least part of it. In the second where I let my instincts get the better of me, she still urged me on, tempting fate with far too strong a force. Then, in that last moment, she finally disclosed what it was she had been hiding. She'd unearth what it was she was afraid of, whether or not she meant to. the words refused to echo down into my mind, and the slashing of her tone stayed fresh in my mind, cutting me each time it repeated.

'To know that every single second I spend with you is building up to another let down.'

Alethea

"No," I said, letting as little of a breath out as I could with the word. The more that escaped, the deeper the

next gasp would be. I couldn't quite meet my parents gaze, and I had to keep my eyes as far from Charlie as possible, but what I said was honest enough, even if I didn't voice the real reasons. "I have to go to school."

"Oh love, are you sure? One day won't make a difference," Mum babbled, watching me with an undying apprehension. I looked in the direction of the front door; deciding it was the most casual motion that didn't involve connecting my eyes to either of theirs'.

"There's a lecture today," I lied smoothly, forcing my words through the catch in my voice. "I can't miss it. It's either an hour today, or about four later."

"Honey, we'll find some way around that," Mum assured me. "I mean, I really don't like the idea of you going in today. I'll send a note to the school, and we'll see if we can get a recording of the lecture done. Anything else we'll sort out."

"No Mum, I have to go in." I never lied to my parents, and it was beginning to show. I didn't usually tell them a whole truth, like about what had happened

yesterday; but I never needed to. "Tuesday's the most important day of the week for me - it has all of my main classes."

"Sweetie, I think what your Mum's trying to say is that we think it would be best if, at least for today, you-"

"No," I repeated, my tone sounded dead. "I have to-"

"Love, you don't have to do anything," Mum promised. "We can sort something out."

Her voice was almost pleading. I flicked my gaze to the ground, and my hand tightened on my bag, still at my side. What I needed was normality. Staying here and thinking things over wouldn't help anything. I couldn't imagine how worried she would be; but one glance would tell me all. I restricted my eyes easily to the door, my mind begging my muscles to move for it.

Mum continued; her voice straining higher with each new note. "I mean, I can call the school, say you won't be in - someone else will pick up your assignments if you're worried-"

"What would you say?" I shot at her, not moving my eyes. "'I'm sorry, my daughter won't be in today because she's a bit upset' doesn't sound like something that our Head would take, even in the best of moods."

"Alethea, I just don't like it. Stay home today, and we'll see how you feel tomorrow," she said, trying her best at persuasion. "One day will be fine, and we'll sort out the details later - if you're that worried-"

"We don't need to see how I feel tomorrow - I feel fine," I protested. The only reason that the words didn't falter was because everyone here took my description as a physical explanation, including me. "There's no reason to-"

"You aren't going and that final!" Dad said, his voice raised and his hand in a fist against the table. His tone was full of authority, a note that didn't allow an answer. My eyes met his, and I was the fury that had slipped into his voice melted away as he looked at me. I couldn't care what he saw; didn't want to know what he thought; and wouldn't let something that I had been prepared for shred my life to pieces.

I couldn't help it. I heard the sound edging around his voice; and recognised it instantly. I'd heard it enough from the guy my parents blamed for what had happened yesterday. I had enough of having my choices taken away from me.

The worry I saw circling my reflection in his eyes tipped me over the edge and I ran from the room, slinging my bag over my shoulder as I went.

"Alethea!" Dad called.

I slammed the door.

Lucy

"I'll see you after class, ok?" he asked.

"Yeah, I guess," I replied, disappointment ringing in my tone. He laughed, just like he always did; leaving the heavenly notes of his gorgeous laugh in my dazzled mind.

"Yeah, it's a pain isn't it?" he asked, joking. "I mean, it's a whole hour where I can't see you. If I didn't know I'd see you straight away afterwards, I don't know if I'd survive."

I smiled and laughed too, watching his strong hand run easily through his dirty blonde hair. Brad always made everything so effortless, but he didn't know how right he was about that statement.

"I'll see you then," I promised, and I was immediately submerged in the same overwhelming urge that I felt every other day; the sense that told me that just one second with his lips to mine would be the cure for everything. For a second, I even imagined that his earthy eyes reflected the same want back. It was only when the shrill bell rang again that I remembered where we were.

"Right," he said, his voice slightly husky. "I'll see you then."

"Yeah," I agreed dreamily. He turned away.

I stared after him, not jostled once by the throbbing crowd beside me. He glanced back before he turned the corner and grinned, so I smiled softly back. As I turned back to my dreary classroom, I realised, once again, that my wants and thoughts had gone too far.

That was the problem with and overactive imagination, I thought as I slid silently into my seat. You can never quiet stop it fast enough. One day I was going to do something immensely embarrassing because of this stupid little crush, and then he wouldn't even look at me.

This was set to be the longest lesson of the day. I really hated it. This was my one class today without Brad beside me, and that always made time slower. I'd had my timetable revised once I'd started here, but even I couldn't convince myself that I'd be able to get away with joining a class for woodwork. Not only would it meant that any obsession with him was obvious, I would probably break everything in the workshop.

I pulled my essay silently out of my bag and carried on with it; or rather, I attempted too. How was it that Brad knew everything was to know about classes that he wasn't even in? The only reason that there was more than a title on this page was that he'd been joking and laughing as I wrote it a few days ago.

I didn't need the late appearance to tell me that we had a cover teacher for the day. Mrs Cole was yet to turn up to a lesson, and I personally couldn't understand how he could still be employed with all of the sick days he took. Especially when everyone knew they were under false pretences.

Alethea slipped silently into her seat beside me.

I wondered what Brad was doing. He was probably doing something amazing with a block of wood that I could do no more with than use as a paper weight. Well, I knew he was doing that, I was just being left to fantasise about what he was actually doing as he refused to tell me.

It was only when my eyes drifted absently down to the paper in front of me that I realised the pen in my hand had actually touched it. And that the eyes in the margin were recalling what I thought I'd seen in the hallway a few minutes before. I bit my lip, knowing that I couldn't hand the essay in like that, but also that if Brad saw it he'd be curious. I sighed as I pulled a fresh sheet of paper from my bag and started copying the words over.

Brad still dominated my mind. His hair. His eyes. His smile. His laugh. After about three minutes I gave up copying it because I'd somehow scribbled something irrelevant to the class across the page. Admittedly, it was completely relevant to my thoughts; but that was what happened when you had a writing ambition a boring class and a hot guy. Things get muddled. I easily recalled how my teachers would hate my 'dreamy sections' in essays as they put it. These were the times when my thoughts would drift onto something completely off topic, and the words would simply flow from my hand. Usually, these moments revolved around some fictional scene. Now, there was a mixture of my imagination and memories. This didn't help my classwork.

One glance at the sheet of paper beside me told me that Alethea was having the same trouble concentrating as I was. Except I knew my thoughts were almost worthless, whereas one proper look at her would tell me hers were something different.

Unfortunately, Brad held too much of my mind for me to be able to spare her that look. The bell rang to

signal the end of the lesson; and perhaps that look might have come, if I hadn't remembered that it was on a Tuesday that Brad had his football practise. Every week he told me that I needn't wait; and every week I ignored him and loved to see him running on the sports field. The only time I hated it was when he looked over to me and grinned, reminding me that my invisible state I imagine was nothing more than a dream.

Even so, it was an hour or two of him showing off. There's nothing I would trade it for. I wasn't even sure a ticket to America could waver that decision; not that I'd ever have to make the choice.

Alethea

He'd kept his distance for the day. I didn't look at him; but I could always feel his eyes on me. Even if that weren't enough; I had had everybody shooting me troubled glances from the direction I knew him to be.

Even now, in the haven of my final classroom, I couldn't feel totally alone. Maybe it was because the space beside me that had become temporarily vacant when Miranda deserted me was now filled. I'd been

fine with sitting beside Lucy, until I'd realised exactly how much I had on my mind. Luckily for me, she seemed to have just as many thoughts swirling in her mind as I did; although I didn't expect hers to be as striking.

The painless bell rang.

Surely he'd move on today. After yesterday, I had every hope that he wouldn't be there. My heart felt crushed to hear those thoughts, but I knew it was better than it could have been; than it would have been if I had truly given myself over to him. If I had truly and totally let him in, and followed what I knew I wanted, things could be a whole lot worse for me now. I still heard the protest inside me that at least if I was that far gone, I wouldn't notice all of the stares and glances I got. If I was too encased by abandonment, I wouldn't have it in me to care; maybe that was better. Maybe my aversion to the whole thing had landed me somewhere worse; again.

My fingers were pulling unconsciously at my watch again. The aged, breaking object beneath my touch had been subject to my stress all day. Even now I felt

the strain my discomfort forced upon it. I felt another snap against my fingers, and knew that another cord had broken. Another thread that held the strap to my watch had fallen away. It was only clinging together by its last threads, and I tried not to think about how the precarious situation related to me.

I felt the stutter in my heart when I briskly turned the final corner and saw the unwelcome figure beside my locker again. My whole body froze for a second. It was less than a second before I realised that my outburst yesterday would have been more likely to encourage him than deter him. He could see I hated it, and was probably only continuing to annoy me more. I'd seen the spark in his eyes at my reluctance on the first day.

Nothing really happened. Once my fragile mind accepted that he really was there again, I knew all I could do was wait it out. It sounded futile; but it was really the only option. My heart rate didn't speed as I approached him; the stiffness of the motion was lost in the submission; and I didn't let my mind drift over what I knew this could cost me.

His eyes flicked up when I reached him, but I kept mine focus on extracting my books for the evening. My tone was gone, my despise quenched and defeated, and I didn't say more than I had to.

"Look, Alethea-"

"Save it. I don't want to hear it."

That was the last words I had on the subject. His penetrating gaze refused to leave me on the journey home. A few steep stabs hit my heart when I blocked out what I really wanted, but I didn't let them deter me. He'd shredded enough of my life through, without having my heart as well.

It was only a street away that I remembered why I shouldn't be returning. I wasn't ready to face up to that yet; especially not with the very centre of my devastation tagging along. My hesitation was enough for him to understand; and even through my thoughts I was grateful for that. One more trip to his house wouldn't kill me, even if it felt like it on the inside. There was no way I was going back to mine. I felt totally alone.

Kenneth

Her voice was absent. Her eyes were clear. It wasn't right.

I thought that before was bad when all I could see was defence and caution; but this was near unbearable. There was just nothing there. When she moved, it was from habit, not from want or necessity. At least when she'd spoken before it sounded droned; it sounded programmed - now it was just a carrying sound. It didn't have anything in it.

"Alethea, say something," I practically begged. Most people changed a little when I was with them; but she hadn't changed, she'd just gone. It was as though there wasn't a person there anymore, and it was painful to know that I'd done that.

"What do you want me to say?" she asked. I shook my head; it was really getting to me. It just wasn't right - she was using the absent voice; the one that had nothing in it.

"Just say something - anything." I was desperate on the inside; but I was pretty sure that the urgency

didn't show. Her eyes connected to mine for a second and she breathed heavily for a moment. Her eyes were hard and withdrawn, just emphasising my point. "Alethea..."

She looked at me, as if expecting more; anticipating an order or command, but even if I had had the will to do that to her; I didn't have the voice. She left her eyes effortlessly on mine, a feat she'd found almost impossible a few days before. She sighed slightly after a moment, but when she spoke, there was no improvement to the sound.

"I really don't know what you expect Kenneth," she told me reasonably; absently. She blinked, but no glimmer existed in her eyes; no shine or spark to see. I remember how much I'd seen in those eyes before.

"Tell me," I said, searching my brain for something she would say. "Tell me how much you hate me, then. Go on."

There was no hesitation, no pause or wait or delay. The was no tone or ring to her voice, nothing but the quick notes of each word. Her eyes didn't look away; they did change or move. "I don't hate you."

I raised an eyebrow, knowing how the action irritated her, but the motion was empty. She looked away, but the movement was casual and effortless, not a result of irritation or annoyance.

She was doing everything I said, but she wasn't doing it right. She was practically dead on her feet, just following what I said, but never caring, never wanting, hoping or thinking.

Alethea

I looked at him, conscious that part of my mind was still trying to unravel what he was thinking. I'd failed at that enough to understand why I didn't want it. I'd already seen that there was no point in trying to decipher what he thought of everything, the fact that I was here proved that.

I knew what he was expecting. He thought that I'd just turn away and blow everything off. Well, I wouldn't. I would wait this out. It was all I could do; and I knew that. I felt my expression change; it morphed just slightly when a strange glint appeared in his eyes. I felt an odd sense telling me to step back, away from him, but I ignored it.

Something inside me was sparking; almost as though my mind was trying to make me remember something. The familiarity as saw the glossed look in his eyes was terrifying. I felt the ringing in my mind, telling me something; telling me to get away. I didn't let the aversion show; knowing what little it would do.

When he said my name again, his voice was layered. I heard everything when he said it, but it sounded so wrong. My eyes narrowed slightly as I tried to make sense of the thoughts that turning in my mind. His movements became as smooth as silk; the silence as he withdrew his voice from the atmosphere pulsing in my ears.

I was weary; I had to allow myself that. Even if I didn't know why, I felt the tension seeping into my muscles as he crossed the span of the room. His motion blended into the air around him, giving his whole form an unstable air. As I thought I realised what he was about to do, I began to move back; but he was holding me to him before I could.

I pushed against his chest, the beating in my own becoming frantic as he revived the stiffness of the shadows of my dream encircling me. I couldn't move away, my whole body against him. I tried not to let my worried eyes rise, but they slithered up to meet his anyway; fully expecting the sheen I saw in them, but shocked by the strength of it.

Half a second before he did it; I realised what was happening. My body went limp as I remembered, shocked into silence and held without motion. I knew I shouldn't know this as his lips met my neck. I shouldn't know what he was or what was going on. I just hoped that the knowledge didn't slip through my mind again once I awoke once more.

As I felt the blood being pulled to his lips, the darkness began to descend over my sight. Even before I felt my body slip to unconsciousness; I felt the fresh memories begin to fade into my mind.

Kenneth

Amos was right, and I knew it. Alethea wasn't like anyone else I'd had to deal with. I knew she was different; I just didn't know why. All I knew was that,

different or not, she hadn't been herself today. She'd been less than herself; not even a slight hint of her essence in her movements or words. I had all the time in the world to dwell upon why. No-one else had changed that deeply. But she was different. It hurt to see that she'd changed so much.

Something fell onto her expression. Her breathing was even and her heart rate steady. After a day without any emotion showing through her mask, I knew that her sleep was finally permitting the thoughts she'd been hiding the whole time to break through to sight.

I didn't need to see her eyes to recognise the expressions she gave me.

Alethea

I sat up as soon as my eyes opened, the quick motion making me feel worse. I was panting heavily, and I felt boiled, but I awoke to a cold sweat. My heart thudded strongly and defiantly in my chest, each beat laboured as the realisation engulfed me.

It was just a nightmare.

I put my hand behind me and leant back onto it, crossing my legs in front of me. Just a dream. Just fantasy. Not real. Fake. The only sound around me was the echoes of my heavy breaths. My head spun, but the reassurance of my firm fist on the sheets below me kept my steady.

"Alethea? What's wrong?"

I hadn't noticed him, but his voice made my heart race more. My voice was lost in the series of sharp gasps that left me. Just a dream. Only imaginary. I blinked a few times, but my eyes didn't focus any further.

"Alethea?" he sounded truly worried; and as a subject of my wants for his concern, I answered his caring tone.

"I - yeah - fine," I rushed. I gulped down the reluctant air around me, trying to steady my pulse. I couldn't look at him, and my fingers were fiddling unconsciously with the fragile strap of my battered watch.

"Are you sure?" he checked. Why did his voice have to sound so sincere? His concern engulfed me for a second, and my head was still spinning. I answer again, automatically.

"Yeah," I breathed. "I'm fine. It was just...just a nightmare."

I heard my voice echo back into my thoughts, and speech of the prospect made it more comprehendible. It was only a dream. I vaguely noticed the haste as my fingers played and twisted the delicate fabric around my wrist. My mind was starting to wrap around it; and my breathing slowed slightly as I calmed.

"What about?" he asked softly.

I almost flinched. I smothered the motion quickly, sure that he wouldn't have seen. It was just the shadows again; with one difference. They had been tight around me, I couldn't move. I had tried to get away, but I couldn't. I had felt the energy leaving my body; just the same as always, and had felt myself fall. The darkness had taken over my sight - the same endless darkness - but not before...

The last threads of my watch broke away under my fingers. I glanced at it, and without a conscious thought, my hand jerked towards the wall and flung my watch to the bin. It was useless, worthless, and I didn't need to think that it was any kind of strange symbol or meaning for me.

Kenneth caught it. He hadn't been there, or near there, but he caught it. I felt my heart race again as his speed fit perfectly into the faint scene I was trying to block from my mind. My eyes were directed downwards, not brave enough to risk seeing any other reminders.

"Alethea?"

It wasn't a warning. He wasn't cautioning me or scolding me. My eyes flicked to his, and the sapphire irises that met mine weren't hiding anything. The honesty and care I saw were really there; really for me. The fierceness of his expression and the sheen in his eyes from my nightmare were gone. No, they'd never been there; I'd imagined it all.

I shook my head vigorously; disregarding the nightmare and forgetting the thoughts that had just

shrouded my mind. I looked down again after a moment, slowing my motion to nothing. "I'm fine. It was just a dream."

Harry

Susan looked at the clock again. Not a minute had passed since she'd last checked it. She was almost jumping from her nerves.

"Calm down," I told her, yet again. "She'll be fine."

"Yes, yes," was all she said in reply. Her eyes flicked around the room, taking in everything from the darkening sky outside to the slight ruffles in the sofa's cushions. The impatience didn't leave her body.

"Susan," I said, capturing her attention. She looked at me, and I saw the unnecessary worries residing in her eyes. "Trust me, she will."

And she did trust me.

I eventually coaxed her away from the lounge. I sent her upstairs with Charlie, and, seeing as he didn't look as if he'd be sleeping for quite a while, I knew she'd be up there quite some time. That didn't calm

me down at all while I was sat in the lounge, eyes resolutely focused on the empty driveway.

I was sure she would be alright; she'd been out this late before. It was only because this morning's episode was playing in our minds that we were even a little worried. And that yesterday had...

We couldn't even get her to tell us what had happened. I tried to keep my thoughts straight, but another glance at the clock sent me into a spiral of possibilities. Then I saw her.

"You are in so much trouble, young lady," I said, opening the door as she approached.

She pursed her lips, but all she said was, "I know."

As soon as she was inside, I closed the door again. I half expected her to try and slip upstairs or something quickly, but she didn't. She just stood there, eyes on the ground, looking nervous; as well she should be.

"Where were you?" I asked her reasonably. She opened her mouth to speak, but thought better of it and stayed silent. I tried a different question. "You

have your mobile - why didn't you call if you knew you'd be late?"

"The battery," she began. She thought better of that as well, and left the sentence hanging. I couldn't quite believe what I was hearing.

"What has gotten into you?" I asked her, baffled. "Honey, we know when you're telling the truth and when you're not."

She glanced up, but as soon as her eyes met mine she looked instantly away again. There was silence for a moment.

"I was..." she trailed off, not meeting my eyes.

"Where?" I demanded. She looked back up at me, but more to check my reaction than anything else.

"With Kenneth," she mumbled. Then she bit her lip.

I was stunned into silence. When my voice eventually returned, the look on her face told me that every thought I'd had was mirrored by my expression. After flexing my jaw slightly, I controlled my voice to a reasonable level to ask her to repeated

what she'd said; clearly. The same response came back.

"After yesterday?" I clarified.

She nodded, looking to her left.

"And what exactly happened yesterday?" I asked, looking for an answer Susan and I had been pondering all day.

She just shook her head.

"After all of that, and you're just going to..." I trailed of, hinting for some kind of answer.

"I can't really not see him," she told me quietly.

"What do you mean? Of course you can! Do you want to see him? Even after all that fuss?" I asked her. "All of that yesterday, and you're just going to forgive it? How can you want that?"

She didn't say anything; didn't move, lost in her own thoughts.

"Do you even realise how late it is?" I continued. She looked down then, admitting that she did. "What on

Earth have you been doing? Heaven knows it isn't anything useful like schoolwork."

She glanced at me, and then something hit her expression. Apparently, I hit a nerve; there was something she was meant to be doing. Her eyes flicked to the stairs and to the clock.

"Big Project?" I guessed. She nodded. "How much is it worth?"

She peaked out at me from under her lashes, still directing her head downwards. "Quite a lot," she told me. My expression coaxed her into continuing. "About a quarter of the final marks."

I waved her away, and she started immediately up the stairs.

"Alethea?" I said; she turned back.

"Yeah Dad?" she sounded nervous now, on the last note. I considered grounding her, but that didn't seem like the right way to do this.

"I don't want him here, you understand?"

"Perfectly."

Her tone struck me. She didn't sound annoyed or regretful; she was almost agreeing with me.

"And you're back before curfew from now on," I concluded.

She nodded and turned away again, before Susan came out onto the landing. She hadn't heard the conversation, I was sure, but I'd be repeating it to her soon enough. The look on her face told me I needed to control my expression better. She rushed down the stairs, the impatience for earlier gone; but I knew the expression well.

"You did not just tell her she could see him?" she scolded me. She had heard the conversation.

"Not strictly," I told her. She turned away from me, fretting as she entered the kitchen; 'What if he...' again and again constantly erupting from her lips. This was Alethea's choice, I resolved. I couldn't stop her; not forever. That didn't mean I was happy with it.

Good Lord Harry, I told myself. You are far too soft.

Brad

"God Al, you look terrible," I told her. She stared at me for a moment, trying to work out my words.

"Thanks," she replied sarcastically; she wasn't really paying me enough attention to care what I thought at the moment. "Can you hold this for a sec?"

"Well seriously," I told her, taking whatever it was that she thrust into my arms. "You look exhausted, and you've never risked being this late before. Did stay up all night or something?"

"Almost," she consented, frantic eyes scanning the hallway. "I got in late. I mean really late. And then I remembered..."

"That doesn't sound like you. Late and forgetful?" I raised an eyebrow. "You're slipping A. Pretty soon You'll be as bad as me on schoolwork." She half smiled.

"I will not," she promised.

"Besides, if you start falling behind, who am I meant to copy off?" I asked her. This time, she really did smile; she even laughed. That was a sound I hadn't heard in a while.

My eyes drifted for a second. There was Lucy. I felt strange when I saw her; I mean, everything was fine with us when we were laughing and joking like we usually were. There was nothing strange about when we were with everyone else. It was those tense little moments like yesterday that made me think.

It was with a jolt that I realised I had been staring; and the only reason I noticed that was because I hadn't noticed as she approached, and now she was stood before me.

"Brad?" Alethea asked, stifling a smile.

I snapped out of it and laughed. This was almost how it used to be. This was just like it used to be. Then I caught Miranda's eyes across the hall.

Alethea

My eyes skimmed the classroom lightly; subtly. I was shocked by what I saw. It appeared that I hadn't been the only one who left this project until last minute. Obviously there were the excellent ones; the ones that would get top marks and probably worth a lot

more. I almost laughed as I realised that that was what my work usually looked like to people.

Most of the class, like me, had thrown something together. It was practically good enough to get a high mark, but not above and beyond. Then there were the people whose work might just pass; but might fail; and the few stragglers who had nothing in front of them.

I rested my head in my hand, propped up on the desk. The idea that I had spent most of the night doing this seemed more real than before, but now the sleep was starting to catch up with me. It wasn't helped by the non-existent conversation at lunch either. If I was with Brad or Lucy, we'd have been laughing and joking; I mean, sure, that would have tired me out; but I'd take that over being almost out of it for the whole time. I kept myself on the fringe of consciousness, but Kenneth's presence did little to help that.

I had barely looked at him today. I wasn't doing it purposefully, but I found it easier to focus on everyone else running around than his eyes, with

their swirling sapphire focused only on me, which refused to turn away. I didn't know what I would do tonight. I wouldn't go home straight away, because I knew Kenneth would come too, and that was something I wasn't going to be able to shy away from. I didn't know I could manage going anywhere else though, I was so tired. You would think, that with all the extra sleep I was managing to get, missing one night wouldn't make such a difference, but I was shattered.

So the options were either that Kenneth came back to mine - which would probably lead to absolute disaster, and I wasn't sure how much of an understatement that was - or - hoping that I could get through one afternoon without falling asleep, when lately I hadn't been able to do it even when I was wide awake - I was going somewhere else.

Mrs Klein walked in at that point, her eyes sparkling and expectant. I looked casually away before she could see what I had. She usually made a point of showing my work off, which I thought was a bit much personally. I laughed it off; and usually most of

the class did too. I had been great to be able to do the work without the embarrassment or the teasing.

Being the kind of person that she was, Mrs Klein always spent the lesson making every stand up and say a bit about their projects, either immensely humiliating you when you don't have anything, or pressuring you into a panic when you did. I was up first, which got it out of the way so that I could just sit and think for the rest of the lesson.

I didn't have much of an option in this. I would have to struggle through the evening, and then I'd make sure I got home on time - early if I could - and have a quick dinner. Then I'd just be able to get to bed and that would be the day over and done with. As long as I didn't forget to feed Diana, as I had yesterday - I severely hoped Mum remembered when I wasn't there - then I'd be fine; until I went through it again tomorrow.

"Honestly, this is extremely disappointing." Mrs Klein's voice invaded my thoughts sharply and I was jolted back to the classroom. "You've known about

this for two weeks, everybody was here when it was set."

"But Miss," Kyle tried to say. "I-"

"No, stop right there," she said. She turned to me. "Alethea, what happened two weeks ago? The same day I set this project?"

"Uh," I said, arranging my scattered thoughts. I had no idea, my thoughts had been so pointed with Kenneth, and that didn't leave much space in my mind for anything else. Since I'd seen him stood there...

My expression went blank.

When it was clear that I didn't have the right answer, she turned back to Kyle. "I said 'no reasons, no buts, no ifs, no whys'. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Well," Kyle began, revising his excuse that it didn't hold the words but, if or why. He was clearly having trouble. The bell rang and he grinned. "All I can say is I have football practise."

Then he slipped out the door.

"If you don't have anything for me next lesson - you'll be off of that team!" she called after him. She shook her head when she turned to us. "Boys, eh?"

The classroom slowly emptied. I might not have had the answer she was searching for, but I had one of my own. Two weeks ago to the day, Kenneth had moved on from Miranda; on to me. That meant that today was two weeks later; and that me he would just about definitely be gone today. I couldn't explain how I felt about that. Part of me was elated that it was over and I had survived it, but another part was holding me back, disappointed. Maybe I didn't want this to happen; not yet.

Logic still told me that now was better than later. I was in a trance as I move through the corridors. He wouldn't be there. I was sure. Two weeks was his longest stretch. And now that was over. I had managed it. I wouldn't have to avoid everyone now; I could see my brother, my parents, my friends, Diana; everyone. I wouldn't be forgetting everything and rushing it last minute. I would have my thoughts

constantly warped around the figure I had known to fear; the one that still placed some strange feeling inside me when he looked at me. I still knew that I felt too scared of him to be real; there was no reason. The fear had almost stopped inside me, or so I thought. I realised then that I had only gotten used to it; it hadn't gone. It just got a whole lot worse when I saw that glint in his eyes. Why did I think I'd seen that so many times, when really, there couldn't be?

I knew I wasn't immune to this. I wouldn't instantly snap back to normality; he'd still be playing on my mind for a while. The way his eyes would be content just to look at me. When I thought about that, I was actually quite flattered; that possibility just never occurred to me when I was trying not to speak. The way his biceps pushed against the sleeves of everything he wore, so he always looked strong. The way his lips could move so gently into such a soft smile when he really wanted to. The way his hair fell forwards and could still look perfect. The way his voice could encase me in a moment.

But, I told myself sternly, that was what every girl missed. That was what he did to all of them, and that meant it meant nothing to him. He didn't care, and probably never would. It made no difference to him, it was only an advantage to make girls fall at his feet. Everything I had just thought was falling for him, and that was something I wasn't going to do - hadn't done. That wasn't about to change.

Then I rounded the corner and saw him stood beside my locker.

He looked up to me, sapphire eyes swirling. I saw his softer smile - my smile - pulling at his lips when he saw me. He stifled it, and everything crashed back to me. He shouldn't be here. And even if he was, he certainly shouldn't be smiling. Not at me. Not like. It was unfair. Did he even realise it was almost impossible for me to remember to be cold with him when he did that?

Kenneth

The disappearance of everything in her eyes when she turned the corner was immediate. There wasn't a scrap of emotion left; not a glimmer of anything. The

smile that had dared to hover over my lips when I saw her vanished just as quickly.

I'd hoped that maybe things wouldn't be like this; but the only time that had happened before was when she forgot why she was like this; and it was too late for that now. Even as she walked over, just as elegant as always, I could see nothing in her expression. I didn't even bother to say anything when she reached me, sure that I'd be greeted by the same absence I had seen before; and fearing what it could bring out of me.

I saw the reassurance of what I had seen from lunch. God was she shattered; there was no other word for it. I frowned at her, but she didn't see as she turned away. And I was about to...

One day wouldn't make a difference. I could manage one day. Just an afternoon where I could really see her, without anything set on her expression, and without an edging defence to her eyes. One day wouldn't do any harm. But she really needed it.

Alethea

Mum looked surprised to see me back. I doubted if she was as surprised as I was, thought. Kenneth had just muttered an excuse and then rushed off, leaving me to my own devices; not that I could object.

"You're home early, love," she commented cheerily.

"Yeah, well," I smiled. "I thought maybe I'd better catch up on the sleep I missed last night. Last period was almost unbearable."

I saw a tension in her eyes; one that didn't belong there. After a second, it was gone and I decided I'd imagined it. I turned to head upstairs, fully intending to get the sleep I desperately needed.

"Um, honey...about last night..."

Lizzie

"You were talking about me."

Of course, it was a true statement; but I wasn't about to admit that. It didn't look as if Amos was too keen on being caught out either. Kenneth's eyes flicker between the two of us, although I notice that the

annoyance was strongest when they skidded over me. Charming.

"We weren't-"

"You were," he stated. I rolled my eyes. He made it sound like the end of the world. The hard look from my elder brother told me that that action probably wasn't particularly helpful. He just focused on Kenneth, weary. The silence was killing me, so eventually I decided to break it.

"Yes, ok? We were talking abut you. Big deal." I slumped down onto the sofa, although both of the glares I received marked this as inappropriate. If he wanted to make a big deal out of it, he could; this wasn't an unusual occurrence. Admittedly, he was unaware of the interest I had taken in his current 'situation', but even so...

I could see him fighting what to do. Part of him want to lunge for me, wanted to hurt me; bad. Part of him knew it wouldn't work. And part of him just wanted to know what we'd said. I almost sighed, but stopped the breath before it could sound. I stood, looking straight at him.

"Go on, take your best shot," I told him.

He didn't move his sceptical eyes from mine, and I did my best not to alter my gaze either. I succeeded without fault. The usual tension in the air seemed to dematerialise around me, and the absence unsettled him. The only brief jump his eyes made was to my now-healed arm, but they didn't stay away for long.

I didn't move; neither did he. Amos seemed to almost absorb the tension I usually held; he seemed more stressed at this offer than he was at my retaliation. Kenneth thought I was deceiving him, and I really don't know what Amos thought as he saw me deliberately position myself in the most venerable way that I had in years.

"Go on," I repeated.

He ran.

"What was that?" Amos asked when he was gone, probably thinking that I was merely attempting a new form of provocation. I stared after my brother for a minute, and then straightened up' slowly. My

defiant eyes rose to his and my expression was set and protected as I spoke.

"I don't have to explain myself to you."

Alethea

After coming home to catch up on sleep, the last thing I expected was a lecture from my mum. Of course, because it was what I least expected, it was what I got; that's what always happened with me.

When I was struggling to open my eyes after every blink, my attention soon left the conversation - well, the monologue - Mum was giving. I still got the gist of it. Basically, Mum thought that Dad had been way too soft on me last night; but seeing as it had been and gone, she couldn't really do much about it. She wanted to ground me, I could tell, but she knew it would be unfair to do that after it had blown over.

Now I was up in my room, with her words swirling in my mind, and Diana purring under my hand. Stress and thoughts did little to help the prospect of sleep, so, as I stared at my unmoving ceiling, I had to

confront the memories and sounds that presented themselves to me.

Kenneth

I yelled when my fist hit the bark, and the sound echoed around me and ran through the forest. It wasn't the only thing running, but I swear... This was my place; my haven. If my sister so much as set one foot into this clearing...

She didn't look worried as she launched herself into the space. My loathing eyes stayed on hers as she straightened up, and my fist twitched at my side. She didn't react. Whether that was because she didn't see or she didn't care I didn't know. The look in her eyes was exactly the same as it had been before.

I swung around, again, and grazed my fist because of how much power I put behind it. I left my unyielding eyes on the shuddering tree and it snapped and fell, the reverberating crash falling into the air around us.

God. After everything she'd done to me, ever, and I couldn't make my fist go anywhere near her on the

one occasion I had a fair chance. There was a long moment where neither of us spoke.

"Do you actually want anything?" I spat. My furious eyes turned to her, and I felt almost guilty when I saw the innocence in hers. God I was going soft, this was my blinkin' sister, for crying out loud.

"I just wanted..." she trailed off and my arms quivered in rage. She quickly edited her comment into a full sentence. "I wanted to know you were ok."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

"No," she confessed. "But I'm not going to lie to you about it."

"Perfect," I muttered, sinking to the ground where I sat and pressing the heals of my hands into my eyelids, trying to calm the pulsing anger running through me. I'd never had to control it before.

She sat down beside me, gingerly.

"What are you doing?"

She didn't answer, and I slowly, lifted my head to glare at her. It didn't matter that my gaze was still

distorted form the pressure; she wouldn't have flinched away anyway.

"I was just...remembering."

"Remembering what?"

She laughed, although it sounded slightly forced. "When we were little. And you really couldn't fight. And other things."

"Like what?" My voice sounded more curious than angry now.

She hesitated this time, and when she blinked her eyes looked far away. She self-consciously stroked her hand through her hair and her voice was quiet when she spoke. "Just...how we used to be."

"Then you changed."

My tone was blunt and unquestionable.

"You did too."

I shrugged.

She laughed, but more from shock this time. "No. Don't go pinning everything on me - you changed just as much as I did, and faster."

I scoffed. "Only because I had to."

"No," she shook her head sadly. "You didn't have to felt. You felt that you did, but you didn't have to. You didn't need to keep up with everything - but you still tried."

"It didn't feel like a choice."

Alethea

"Honey! Dinner's ready!"

I sat up quickly in surprise, causing my head to spin. I swayed slightly, but caught my balance before I fell off of the bed. I blinked to discourage the disorientation.

"Yeah, right, ok!" I yelled back downstairs. Then I breathed, "Wow."

I looked at the clock. Dinner was late, we usually ate before seven thirty. That only impressed me more. That meant that I'd spent the whole afternoon - take

about half an hour for Mum's lecture - asleep. And not a single nightmare to invade the serenity.

Diana slinked into the room and came over to curl around my legs. I leant down and stroked her, smiling. She picked up on my mood quickly, and I was sure I saw her eyes beam in response. I suddenly felt bad for neglecting her, what with all the Kenneth business. She still jumped up and into my arms at a second's invitation.

Maybe the reason I didn't have any nightmares was that I was so exhausted that I simply couldn't. Every other time, I hadn't really needed to sleep at all; so my mind would have been restless. Maybe the key to a good sleep is to be too tired to dream. But, apparently, you have dreams every three seconds, and you forget them. Maybe I had had the nightmare, and was just too tired to remember it. Either way, I'd had a good sleep and hadn't woken up in a panic; that was good enough for me.

I didn't much fancy testing that theory though, I didn't have the energy to try it out; and if that wasn't what it was, I'd be exhausted for days.

"Come on girl," I whispered to Diana. "Let's go get some grub."

Kenneth

"Was there a reason behind this?" I eventually asked. "When I came out here, I didn't exactly have a heart to heart in mind." Lizzie smiled slightly; sadly.

"Just..." she hesitated, years of rivalry fighting against the words she wanted to say. Her gaze drifted and then remained, unwavering, upon the harsh dirt of the shadowed undergrowth. When she looked up to me, I saw an expression that truly seemed like the sister I had known. "Just know that I am here for you. Whatever you need, I do want to help."

"That's..." I lifted my eyes to hers. "Thanks."

Alethea

"I'm only taking a guess here," Kenneth said quietly to me as we walked from our final classes to the school's doors. "But I would suppose you have a better insight into the school's general mind than I do?"

"I would suppose so," I agreed reluctantly, as yet another pair of eyes flitted away from me. "Not that I see why it's important."

"Do you have any idea why everyone is staring?" he asked bluntly. I was startled by the abrupt inquiry, but not startled enough to tell the truth. Everyone was staring for the simple reason that this was my fifteenth day under his eye, when mostly his record was fourteen; and even that wasn't rumoured to have been anyone from this school.

"No, none at all," I lied. The tone to my voice didn't give anything away; my movements didn't shudder and my resolve didn't twist; it was the easiest lie I'd ever told, not that I'd had to tell many. I hated how easy such deception had become since he'd 'chosen' me.

"Forgive me for this," he whispered gently.

"For what?" I asked, a sudden apprehension rising in me. "Kenneth?"

He looked up to me, and my expression slipped. My chest tightened when I saw a familiar sheen in his

eyes. My mind raced. That sheen had been there once before and only in my nightmare. So why was my mind suddenly plastered with more images of the same empty, needless look?

"Just...forgive me."

I almost jumped in alarm when his voice was right beside my ear. I opened my eyes from my rapid blinks of worry, he was suddenly there. When I tried to step back, his arms were already barriers stopping me. I flinched away from them, but straight into him. His hold tightened.

"Kenneth," I said. My voice choked out after that, although I couldn't say why. I didn't have an explanation for my racing heart either, but that wouldn't calm. I couldn't bear to look up and the wanting glint in his eyes, so I looked downward.

He was stiff. One of his hands stayed on my back, holding me to him; whilst the other glided around me and urged my chin up. As soon as my eyes met his, they were transfixed; and I was too scared to move. The darkness encroaching on the rocky sapphire of his eyes was chilling.

It was just like a nightmare; my nightmare. But I knew this was real. It was real, happening, and more terrifying than I thought anything could be.

As soon as I realised that, every muscle in my body was trying to get away from him; trying to push and pull away, to no avail. I couldn't tear my eyes away from his, and I fell still when he held me tighter, movement being completely lost to me. Every part of still tried to get away, and the second my hair fell back to expose my neck, I knew it was wrong.

His lips met my neck, and although I instinctively pulled away, knowing what was happening and remembering what I knew I shouldn't, I knew it was no use.

Kenneth

I was completely content just to watch her sleep. The innocence and vulnerability that fell onto her features as she slept was almost shocking. You wouldn't believe she could be that...weak when she was awake. This distance of hers was only a defence; I was almost certain. She'd get past that, and I'd break through it; I knew she was stronger than that

really. She wouldn't hold it up for much longer at any rate - the day before last proved that.

How could she be so swayed by a dream? It was imagination, pure fantasy. As soon as she'd woken up, all I could think about was making sure she was alright. She took that on herself, knowing that nothing was wrong, and stopping everything that told her anything was. She wasn't quite as strong in her avoidance for the rest of the evening, but that was definitely a good thing; it made her more open, and I still knew that she could be persistent when she needed to.

When her eyes flickered open, she didn't see me straight away, because of my still posture. She did exactly what she had before, and with one hand over her racing heart, propped herself up and attempted to calm her racing breaths. She blinked rapidly, almost trying to erase whatever she'd been thinking. When she did see me, there was something hidden about her expression. She lowered her hand slowly as my eyes fixed on it, rubbing her head.

"What's the matter?" I asked her, referring to her worried state. She glanced back at me but looked away quickly. She shook her head. "What's wrong?" I insisted.

"Nothing," she lied. "Just...dreams."

"About what?" I asked, curious. If it was enough to frighten her, I wanted to know what it was. Whatever it was, it never placed the look of terror on her expression that I had seen a week or so previously. It couldn't be as bad as me.

She evaded the question, just like the day before last. She glanced routinely at her wrist, but, of course, her watch was no longer there. "Nothing important. I should be going."

"Not yet," I found myself saying. "Just stay, a little while."

She sat back down cautiously on the bed, unwilling to pursue the conversation but having no pretence to leave. She was still weary; and tense.

"Kenneth," she said slowly. "What is going on?"

"I don't know what you mean," I lied instantly. She clearly didn't believe me, but I kept my eyes on hers, fully aware that any tightening in them wouldn't be visible to her. "What could be going on?"

She just looked at me for a moment.

"What?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

She just looked away and shook her head. Some part of me was annoyed by that, but I couldn't quite find it. Whatever it was, I could see that she was going to say it, even if it wasn't today, it would come out. That was the type of person that she was, she was strong and let everything build up inside her, but eventually had to let it all out. I just hoped it wasn't something she felt as terribly about as she did last time...

I went to sit beside, her lowering myself to her level. She turned slightly away from me, but I reached out my hand to turn her face back. She wanted to jerk away, I could see it; but she didn't do it. Something stopped her. Her eyes met mine and whatever she saw in mine made her speak.

"It's nothing Kenneth, really," she didn't want to say it; to say anything. I could feel the fear of what I could - what she thought I would - do if she didn't give me an answer. "I'm just...not one for dreams."

"So you had a bad dream. What was it about?" I asked her softly, stroking her flowing hair back. I hated the way everything she did could control what I was thinking; especially when she didn't realise it.

"Just..." she trailed off; but I could see she was trying to say it, she just didn't know how. "I don't know, it's just something terrifying."

"I bet I've seen worse," I murmured.

"What?"

"Nothing," I assured her quickly. She didn't know what it was. That didn't sound right. Then again, she wouldn't remember me; and if her blood tasted that alluring, maybe something slipped through. The fact that it tasted better probably made me act differently, and that would change things.

"It's just dark, and silent," she confessed. She was finally saying something; and she didn't even seem to

realise that she was admitting it. I didn't know how I felt about that. It worried me that she didn't seem to know she was doing it, but the fact that it was me, and it would give me some kind of chance to understand her balanced that. As long as it was me who knew these things, I knew I wouldn't use them; so that seemed alright. The idea the she had told someone else, when I hadn't known at all was just...

"Sounds like night," I muttered. She looked at me. "Night is dark and silent. It can be horrible."

She smiled sadly. "I guess so. You must think I'm a total wimp for this. I mean, night. I don't even know if that's what it is, I just-"

"No," I assured her. "I think you're perfect. Just the way you are. Fears and all."

I didn't mean to say the words; they just came out. But they seemed right. I knew that I couldn't think any less of her for anything she feared, no matter what I tried to do. It didn't matter. This was Alethea, and she was different; different from anything I'd ever seen or thought of, or even imagined. Unique.

"Perfect doesn't exist," she muttered, looking upwards.

"It can," I said confidently, loud enough for her to hear. "And perfect doesn't hold secrets."

"It's...it's...I just don't know," she admitted meekly, shaking her head in confusion. "It's something about - in the dreams - it's - I can't move, and I don't even know why. There's just nothing to see, nothing to hear, and I don't even know what it is that scares me. It just does."

Christ. That sounded...

Just a dream, as she said herself. I could be influencing this, but so could a lot of things. She would never remember anything about it, so truthfully, I didn't know why I was worrying. Well...worrying about her memory anyway. I couldn't just not worry when she looked so...

"I can't even see any reason for it. I don't know what it could mean - I asked Kate, and she and her friends are really big on that sort of thing. Everything she

came out with doesn't relate to me at all, and I feel even worse for it."

My face paled; slightly.

"We should probably get you back," I told her, knowing that my determination on keeping this a secret was shaking. Her eyes jumped up to mine, sensing the fault. I stood and turned away from her.

"Kenneth-" She took hold of my arm, something that she hadn't had the courage to do before. I spun when she pulled me, just to humour her. I was facing her now. "What aren't you telling me?"

I shook her off easily and her resolve crumbled. "We should go," I repeated. She looked to the ground for a moment and nodded. She didn't say anything else the whole trip back.

Alethea

I got in and my parents cut off whatever conversation they were having to glance at me. I knew it was late; but it was before curfew. Just. Without looking at them, I trudged my way upstairs and slipped into my room.

I could hear the hesitation and debate downstairs, but I blocked the words of it from my mind and changed quickly, ready for a long, relaxing sleep. I heard Dad edging his way up the stairs just as I pulled the thick blankets of my bed up over my shoulder. He paused outside my door for the slightest second.

I closed my eyes quickly, and relaxed my mouth and expression. Even as the light poured across my pillow, I didn't let my eyelids flicker. Dad just stepped slightly into the room and looked at me for a moment. He glided slightly over to beside the bed, and bent down to whisper in my ear.

"We know you're keeping secrets. Just know that we'll listen when you need us." He kissed my forehead gently. I didn't know whether he knew I was awake or not, but my expression changed a little under the light. He straightened up and left without another word, clicking my door shut softly.

I twisted around, onto my side, resting my head softly on the pillow as the light outside my door cut out. Diana crawled up under the covers and wriggled

up beside me. I smiled into the darkness, despite everything.

I ran my hand over her fur, knowing that there was something I was forgetting. I shook my head at the thoughts, but I knew they were right. There was something; something before the darkness and the shadows.

All I had left of my thudding heart from earlier was a distant dream.

Chapter 6

Blood Stained Ruby Part 6

A Reminder Of A Memory

When I opened my eyes the next morning, there was definitely something different. It wasn't quite as amazing as it sound, due to the quick discovery that the main reason for that feeling was that life around the house was already in action. Unfortunately, I wasn't.

When I glance at my clock, my body practically started to feed me adrenaline on the spot. I could barely slow my movements enough to lift Diana without waking her. I couldn't get out of bed with her on me, so as soon as she was safely on my pillow

again, I dashed around the room, grabbing everything from the floor, desk and cupboard.

"Mum! Why didn't you wake me up?"

Five minutes later I was dressed presentably, with my school bag packed and flung to the bottom of the stairs, awaiting a departure, with my hair pulled back into a pony tail. It was the easiest thing to do on a morning like this; and I was still running late.

"I did honey," she said.

I stopped what I was doing to look at her. "You did not."

"Yes I did. Four times, actually, and each time you said you were getting up." She smiled; the kind of smile that only a mum can give, the sort that says she loves you despite your flaws.

"I don't remember that at all," I muttered. Then again, I had woken up knowing that there was something important I was neglecting. I suppose it could have been this...

"That's exactly what you told me all last year," she reminded me. "And then this year I was silly enough to believe that you might actually make 'punctual' on your school report."

"I have been punctual," I commented. Although I did I have to admit I hadn't always been the model of 'on time', over the past six months that had improved dramatically. Either that, or my dad had finally gotten around to setting all of my clocks to ten minutes ahead of schedule, so that I ended up on time. Talk about twisted logic.

I was tapping my fingers impatiently against the kitchen's counter, mentally noting that it needed another clean - and now I wasn't even looking for it. Maybe I was getting a complex. I had been a lot more talkative lately as well, with Lucy and Brad at any rate. And then last night...

Last night was far away. It hadn't happened. In the same way that last week hadn't happened and I hadn't ended up staring into his eyes. I hadn't almost been sucked into this game that I feared; and I hadn't left reluctantly last night. That was like admitting

that there wasn't something strange going on; or, at least, something he was keeping from me. Even if I could lie to Kenneth, I couldn't lie to myself; and last night had happened. And the worst part was, I thought I felt better for it.

As soon as I'd said the words I felt better. After ages of trying to stop myself from saying anything to him, it had just slipped out. I suppose it was like...venting. Just the fact that I had said it to someone made me feel better, in the same way that keeping a diary helped other people. The fact that I'd actually said everything out loud, and that I'd gotten a proper response from someone shouldn't change that.

And now he probably thought I was a total idiot. Not only was I falling asleep daily, but now I was waking up from a recurring nightmare without the faintest idea what it was about. Darkness and silence, that was all I could say. Night. How scary can night be? It was the only suitable answer for what I seemed to be saying, even if some part of me knew it was wrong. Then I'd just looked at him, and said it. I told myself again and again that I wouldn't fall for those eyes. I

just hadn't counted on that voice...he pulled another answer from me, and I actually said what he must think of me, feeling like an idiot the whole time.

And then he said...

My eyes skidded to the toaster again, willing it to hurry up.

"A watched pot doesn't boil love," Mum recited, rising from her seat to go and fetch Charlie, who'd just started moving about upstairs. I guessed that my Dad was still asleep as he didn't have to be in to work today.

The toast popped up and I grabbed it out of the air, grinning. "And a late girl doesn't eat," I responded.

I pecked Mum on the cheek and then rushed out of the front door, grabbing my bag from the stairs and taking a bite of my toast as I ran. I swallowed as I tried to force my other arm through the strap of my bag before it could hit the gate. Miraculously, I managed it.

"You get cramps if you try and run while you eat," said a voice behind me. I whipped around. Then I

smiled. Then I kicked myself for it. I hadn't really needed to see his face to recognise the voice, but when someone startled me, it was only natural to turn and face them.

"What are you doing here?" I asked as he walked up beside me.

Kenneth shrugged. "I thought I'd walk you to school."

Then he smiled my smile, and I couldn't help but smile back.

Brad

Lucy was looking over at Alethea. Again. My eyes jumped over too, but I only hated what I saw. When I looked back, Lucy's eyes were on me again. They flicked back across the hall for a moment.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

She didn't believe me; for obvious reasons. I couldn't explain to her why I hated seeing the smile on Alethea's face; she didn't know anything about

Kenneth and as far as she knew, everything had always been like this.

"Brad, what's the matter?"

I forced a smile onto to expression. "Don't worry about it."

She still looked at me, and clearly didn't believe me. She didn't connect anything to Alethea though. A small corner of my mind said that I could just lie and say I was stressed about football or something; but I didn't want to have to do that.

"Just...don't worry about it, 'k?"

"Alright," she agreed wearily, tucking her hair behind her ear. I smiled. She only did that when she was nervous or if she was unsure, and she realised a second to late that the action was useless today. She covered the movement by taking her hand back to pull her hair band out, but I knew what it was really. I looked up as the bell went.

"Brad!" Mark called from down the corridor. I smirked.

"I'll see you later," I said, grinning.

"Ok," Lucy agreed.

I turned away, resolving that next time I was with her, I wouldn't give her reason to worry.

Alethea

"And I expect all," he looked pointedly at me. "Essays completed and in next lesson."

I just looked down at the doodles in my work book. I could feel the eyes on me as I ignored the obvious prompt, but Mr Palmer had always been my worst teacher, so I didn't really expect anything less. As it was the last lesson of the day, I was more interested in getting out of the classroom than anything else.

I was quite shocked to see what the doodles along the margin - and, unfortunately, across the centre - of my page were. They just looked like swirls; empty, black, encasing swirls. I froze for half a second, but as soon as the face they were implying came into focus, I slammed my book shut.

I looked up. Everyone was staring at me. Oops. I kept my head down and packed up the rest of my things; trying to block the reminder of my nightmare and its relevance to the person waiting from me from my mind.

Kenneth

"You did WHAT?" I asked, eyes wide. I turned away from Alethea as she headed around the corner, so that I was facing the white lockers lining the walls. Part of me was aware that this 'outburst' was acquiring more attention than it should from the students around me. The other part was too furious to care.

"Wow, chill mate," my brother's voice said from down the line. The silver phone in my hand was starting to strain as my hand flexed. "It's no big deal."

"Maybe to you," I shot. "Thanks a bunch."

Then I hung up.

"Something wrong?" Alethea asked when I turned and slumped against the lockers. She pulled

something out of her own, putting it easily in her bag but managing to keep her eyes on me.

"No, nothing," I assured her, calming almost instantly because she was there. "Just my brother."

She didn't believe me, but changed the subject. She noticed more than I gave her credit for, and I couldn't say I was completely comfortable with the turn that the conversation took. She nodded slightly at my hand. "That's looking better."

I laughed uneasily. "Yeah, I told you I heal fast."

"Yeah," she agreed, glancing sceptically at me. Why did she have to notice that this morning? Better yet, why didn't I just cover it up? I couldn't help it if Llewellyn decided to have another snap at me. If I'd had any sense at all I would have worn something to cover my hand, but of course Alethea saw and now I had to think of some believable excuse about how it could heal so quickly.

"So," I said hurriedly, changing the subject. "Uh...about my brother. He, er, needs me back tonight, so..."

She looked at me, clearly sceptic. It wasn't exactly that she didn't believe it, it was more that she was suspicious. I almost laughed at the thought, but it didn't quite come. How could she make me feel so awkward? It was unrealistic...

"And I figured that you might..."

She rolled her eyes after a moment, slipping into a momentary relaxation. Not only did she make me feel awkward, she liked it. "I'll be fine for one night," she promised. "Something tells me I'll survive."

Harry

I half expected him to come in. I half wanted him to, despite my better judgement. If he came in here, I could really give him a piece of my mind. Alethea was still at the end of the drive when the phone rang and I tore my gaze away from the two figures and trudged through to the kitchen to grab the phone off of its hook.

"Hello?"

"Hi," replied a jumpy voice. "Is Alethea there?"

"Who is this?" I asked grouchily.

"Rick, Rick Richards."

"Rick-from-London, Rick?"

"The very same," answered the perky voice. "So...is she there? Or is this a bad time? I could call back-"

"No, you're timing's perfect son, I'll just get her for you."

I put my hand over the phone and wandered through to the hallway. A glance out of the window revealed that she was still waiting outside, talking to him - to Kenneth. I opened the door and pressed the phone to my chest.

"Alethea!" I called. She turned to me, but I just pointed to the phone. "It's Rick!"

I didn't purposefully connect my eyes to Kenneth's when I said it, but she clearly thought I did, sparing me a quick glare before she flicked him a cautious glance. He only shrugged and said something to her before he turned away. She frowned slightly when he

left, but once her eyes hit me again, she bounded up the drive. I handed her the phone.

"Stirrer," she accused as she passed me. I was about to reply, but she lifted the phone to her ear and started talking. "Hey Rick, what's up?"

I blinked, surprised, but she was facing away from me.

"No, I just got in from school. Mr Palmer keeps us late on Fridays because he has nothing better to do. Then he mooches around moaning about how there's still loads of kids left at quarter past, claiming that the teachers and staff do have somewhere to be for the weekend. Who knew?"

He said something and she laughed.

When did she get so...giggly? I mean, as a kid I could always make her smile; but lately - every since I'd got back, really - she barely smiled, let alone laughed; and especially not in the relaxed and carefree way she did now. I'd just seen her laughing with Kenneth, and as much as I hated to admit it, that had seemed even happier than she was now. He was just

so...wrong for her - I didn't understand it. I didn't even know why he seemed wrong, but after Monday, to know she could be so simply and easy around me almost infuriated me. Then her laugh interrupted my thoughts again. She was still smiling as she turned to head up the stairs.

"Alethea," I said. She turned back, briefly. "Not too long, ok?"

"Ok," she agreed, still smiling.

Lizzie

He did not look happy. I was glad to be able to say, despite my previous views and opinions, that I didn't contribute to the hostile expression on this occasion. Amos on the other hand, well...

"Oh come on mate - you knew they were coming sooner or later," Amos said, still smiling. He refused to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. "It's not as if they're expecting anything much. They had to come eventually."

"But you told-"

"Yeah, I told them about her - Apasia was thrilled!"

Kenneth growled slightly, trying to control himself. "And what about Damien? Hmm? I bet he just said what a waste of time she must be, and-"

"Mate, I think you're expecting the worst side of him," Amos concluded. "I mean, sure, he wasn't overjoyed, but he's not the heartless git you see him as."

"Not to you anyway."

"Ok boys!" I said loudly, capturing their attention. I stood up from my position on the staircase as their eyes swivelled to me. "That's enough. The fact is, whether or not you like it, Damien and Apasia are coming down this weekend. They'll be gone by Monday morning bro, I really don't see the harm."

"That's easy for you to say-" he began.

"Yes, it is," I interrupted, neglecting for a moment that there was another person in the room as I focused my gaze on my true brother. "Because I believe it. Have you ever thought about it? I mean really?"

He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, giving up winning this argument. "Thought about what?"

I raised an eyebrow but continued. "In three day - seventy two hours - that'll all be over. There's really no point to any of it, but while it's happening, you just have to go along with it. You can spend time dreading it and fearing it, but when you get there, you just have to suck the guts up and get it over and done with - it's not the end of the world. Once it's done, it's done and dusted - finished. Sure, it might haunt you for a while, but things never stay with you that long. You'll get through the week just fine, and afterwards you'll wonder what all the fuss was about - trust me."

Kenneth opened his eyes and focused them on me.

"Some things don't just end," I concluded. "But stuff like a visit, no matter how much you hate it, are always going to be over tomorrow."

"Wow," Amos said, looking at me. "That was deep Liz."

"I take it you mean that as a compliment?" I inquired. He nodded slightly and I smiled. Being the way that I am, I couldn't leave by any normal means, so seeing as I had backed up to the front door as I spoke, I opened it easily. "My work here is done."

Then I did a back flip out of the door. I turned mid flip and took off at full speed for another run - my third in the day - and relished in the energy the adrenaline sent through me.

Kenneth

I stared after Lizzie for a moment, thinking about all of the contradiction to what Alethea had told me that she'd managed to squeeze into that small speech. She'd almost quoted her with the quip about things being done and dusted, which worried me more than it should.

"She's right mate," Amos told me.

"Yeah...I know."

"Where is she anyway?"

"Who? Alethea? She's at home," I shrugged. He raised an eyebrow and I answered his unanswered question, although my voice seemed a little stiff. "Well, I wanted to get back here."

He looked relieved. "You haven't dumped her then?"

"No," I answered quickly. I noticed the look in his eyes as he strolled over. My tone became slightly apprehensive, but I was close to laughter. "What?"

"I told them it was official," he said, laughing as he threw an arm across my shoulders. "I mean, I honestly can't remember the last time you stayed with one girl more than one week, let alone two. Sure she's a handful, but it's working out, right?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess," I said, picking up Alethea's habit of repeating answers. Wow. It had been more than two weeks.

"Right, so I figured, get the introductions out of the way and all - it can't do any harm!" He gave my shoulder a squeeze and then dropped his arm, still grinning.

"It can do a lot of harm," I correctly lazily, distracted.

He shrugged. "Only if you let it."

Then he headed out after Lizzie, although I doubted very much if he was going to run around in the trees for hours on end. I knew where she went afterwards. I'd asked her once, why she went to such extremes to get the blood that she needed, but she told me that it simply showed how fickle men were. I'd raise an eyebrow at that, but she'd only given me a peeling laugh and run off again, promising to explain her antics later. I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to know about it.

She did things so differently to me. At least I stuck with the same person for a little longer than a night. Amos managed to stay with one girl for at least a month usually; only to let her go again when we moved. But we weren't moving for ages yet...we'd got here less than a year ago...

It wasn't exactly that I'd done it on purpose or anything; it was just that, I simply hadn't remembered to move on. That sounded stupid, even to me, but it was true. Usually, I told myself the girls

were distractions. Well, Alethea was certainly that; more than that, I just didn't want to admit it.

Alethea

"Alethea! I thought we agreed you'd be quick!"

"Hold on a sec Rick," I said to the phone, before calling back to my dad downstairs. I could have just gone out to the landing, but I was too comfortable for that. "I am being quick!"

"It's been two hours!"

I debated for a moment, roaming my mind for the best excuse. I didn't have time to be creative. "Well, we've covered about four months worth of stuff - so we're doing well!"

I thought he swallowed it. I mean, it was the truth and all, but I was hoping that he'd overlook the small factor that I neglected to mention. Unfortunately, he worked it out quicker than I could wish. "But you haven't seen him in eight months!"

"That's why it's taking time!" And, if my calculations were correct, that equated to about another two

hours. I doubted very much that Dad would let me get away with that.

"Five minutes Allie!"

"Fine," I grumbled to myself as he went back to the kitchen. I was in the far corner of my room, amongst the long neglected cushions with a pampered Diana under my free hand. I scowled at the door, although I knew it was childish. I was in a very infantile mood - I could always be a fool with Rick and he'd just laugh it off with me. I put the phone back to my ear. "So - anyway..."

"Don't tell me you have to go?" he guessed.

I laughed at how accurate he could be. "Not yet - I have five minutes, but that's in Dad time."

"Dad time?" he asked wearily.

I smiled, leaning back into the softness around me. "Yeah. When he says five minutes, I usually get about twenty - but as long as I'm off before fifty, it's ok."

There was a pause. "Right."

"Don't worry about it, my dad just doesn't enforce things.

"Lucky," he sulked. "As soon as we get off the phone, I have about a million chores to do, and my stepdad refuses to let me off. The only reason I haven't been kicked off the line yet is that I told him..."

"What did you tell him?"

He was silent.

"Rick? What did you say?"

There was another pause, and when his voice came, it was hesitant. "I don't think you'll like it..."

"Why not? Rick, I want to know."

He laughed stiffly, trying to gloss it over, although he was still nervous. "I told him I was phoning my girlfriend. Who I stood up last night. Because he made me stay in."

I laughed.

"I mean, he isn't exactly strict, it's only on chores - really he's a nice guy. So he felt guilty and told me to take as long as I need."

I just laughed some more.

"But hey, what are stepdads for?" he asked once I calmed down.

"I didn't know you had a stepdad," I commented after a while.

"Yeah...my parents got a divorce last year - just after you left."

I froze. "Oh god, I'm-"

"Don't tell me you're sorry, I had that for months. It still kills to know that people think they need to say it," he told me. I fell silent. "You would not believe what it's like - everyone stares at you like you're going to die, just pity, pity, pity and more pity - it's downright humiliating."

"That must have been terrible."

"Eh, you get over it," he said. "Once people realise that really, all they're doing is making things worse. The worst thing is when you're completely fine, and then someone glances at you as if you're mad - you can see some of them are so tempted to practically

tell you off when you should be having the worst time of your life." He faded into silence again.

"That's really unfair. If you manage to forget it, or whatever you do, for at least a little time, it's almost cruel of them to remind you. I mean, you practically have to think about it with your parents, don't you? When you see the way they look at each other."

"Yeah. Like, school used to be practically an escape when they decided to split up. I only told a few people - and some people still don't know - so I could have as normal a day as possible. It still spread across the entire school within a week. If I'd be having a normal day, where I'd just managed to lock it in the back of my mind, someone would come along and catch my eye, looking so sorrowful with their expression it was almost impossible not to remember."

"God..."

"But anyway," he continued, jumping back into his usual, energetic self. "That's done and over with."

"Yeah..."

"Don't go all funny with me just because I told you," he pleaded. "Loads of people have - it ruins everything."

"I'm not going to go funny," I promised him. If he could put this behind him, so could I; it wasn't really any of my business after all. I cast around for something else to say, knowing that my usual silences would make him think I was acting exactly how I'd just promised I wouldn't. "So...how come you waited so long to call again?"

"Well, after last week-"

"Sorry about that," I interrupted quickly. "Er, the phone lines went a bit funny. It happened to everyone in our neighbourhood."

"Oh - ok," he said enthusiastically. One white lie wouldn't do any harm. Before he could say anything else, my dad's voice cut across my thoughts - echoing up the stairs.

"Allie! I said five minutes!"

I covered the receiver when I yelled back. "I'm off the phone Dad!"

"You are not - I just tried to dial my work!"

Oops.

"Can I have two minutes?"

He grumped his way back to the kitchen, but I took it as a yes.

"How long is two minute's of 'dad time' then?"

I laughed; again. It was Rick, I couldn't help myself. "Two minutes is two minutes - this time at least. I should be going really."

"Oh...ok love - I'll see you then." I stifled the laugh until I heard his sigh of relief.

"Stepdad in the room?"

"Yep." He popped his lips on the 'p' just like he always did. "But he's gone now. I'll phone you soon, yeah?"

"Yeah - of course. Just not today, Dad will flip if I'm on the phone again. Or I'll phone you."

"What if someone else wants to phone you?" he asked.

"Oh don't worry," I assured him. "There isn't much danger of that at the moment."

He became curious. He was weary, but still asked the question. "What do you mean?"

"Allie!"

"Tell you what - I'll explain it all to you next time," I said hurriedly. Then I grinned. "See ya loverboy."

I remembered his smile when he spoke again. "Love you honey."

I hung up. Dad moved about downstairs and I knew he was just about to shout up to me again. I sighed when I stood, disturbing the serenity I had cast myself, and headed out onto the landing.

"Here," I said, dropping the phone over the banister. I knew he was there to catch it, I even aimed it for him. He still only just got it thought. I turned back to my room, but was drawn back by a few beeps and then his voice as he saw the call duration.

"Finally! Good Lord, girls can talk for a time."

I gave him an odd look. "Dad - Rick is a guy."

"Not if he puts up with your babbling for so long."

I was still in a childish mood. I stuck my tongue out at him, smiling when he laughed and turned away.

Kenneth

"You alright mate?" Amos asked; again.

I snapped out of it. "Yeah - fine. Why?"

"You just look a bit..." he gestured to me. I knew what he meant, even if he didn't voice it. I wasn't ready to explain it to him; not yet.

"I'm fine," I assured him, standing. Worrying my brother wasn't going to help anything. I hoped a trip out would clear my head. "I'm just thinking."

"About what?" he asked wearily.

My hand traced along the cool face of the gem in pocket as I answered, avoiding Lizzie's cautious eyes. "Everything I suppose."

I darted from the room before he could ask any more, Lizzie's warning fresh in my mind.

Alethea

"Ok hon," I just need to pop out," Mum assured me. "I'll be back soon - do you think you'll be here?"

"Er," I stuttered, startled by the abrupt question. "I'm not entirely sure, but I don't think I will."

"Good, good," she replied absently. I tried to catch her eye, but she turned away before I could. There was definitely something odd going on, more so than I expected. She was already hurrying out of the door when she spoke again. "Your Dad's got the week off, but at the moment he's out taking Charlie around for a drive - just down to the beach and things. He woke up really early this morning and refused to..."

The rest of her words were drowned out when she closed the door behind her. I turned back to the kitchen, slightly thrown by the odd beginning to the day. I'd only come down for a glass of water after all, to be met by my hectic mother and the absence of my father and brother. I grabbed a glass from the side and pushed it under the tap, turning it on as I did so. The silence when I turned the rushing water off was off-putting.

I drank it down quickly and rinsed the glass, making as much noise as possible and trying to forget the last time I'd been left on my own. As I turned back to the door, I almost tripped over Diana, who had just started curling around my legs. I laughed and bent down to stroke her.

"Hey girl, we'll sort your breakfast out in a minute, ok?" I smiled. She purred under my hand and leant her head into it. "I've got to get dressed first."

She followed me upstairs, mewing the whole way, almost as if she knew how much the silence bothered me. The bruises that I saw across my back when I glanced fleetingly in the mirror shocked me. I hadn't expected to see anything, so my eyes had only skimmed across my body. At first I was sure I had imagined them; but when I looked back they were still there, dark and prominent. I ran my hand softly over them, weary.

They were just across my lower back, almost in two lines. A few of them looked fresh, only days old, but others looked as if I must have had them for a few weeks. They didn't feel sore, which explained why it

had taken me so long to notice them, but they were so thick I couldn't believe I hadn't known about them before. I tried to think back of anything that might have caused it, but I couldn't find anything. I hadn't bashed my back, or hit it, or anything as far as I remembered; and I was sure it was almost impossible to not remember something that had clearly happened so much.

Looking into Diana's insightful eyes, I couldn't help but feel that there was something important that I was forgetting; but now was not the time to think about it.

I had to practically empty my wardrobe before I found anything else that still fitted me without looking ridiculous; but I eventually managed it. I forced my brittle brush through my tangled hair, although I eventually had to accept that there wasn't anything I could do about the thick, annoying waves that it formed. After searching for my watch for ten minutes, I remembered what I'd done with it, and made a mental note to get a new one; shocked that it had taken me so long to realise that I needed it.

Wearing a jeans, a T-shirt and with a hair band slipped around my wrist, I headed back downstairs, only to have my breakfast delayed again when the doorbell went. Diana meowed appreciatively when I set her meal down, and then I sighed, flipping my hair back from my face as I wandered out to the corridor. I still had the odd pattern of bruises on the back of my mind.

Kenneth

"Hey," I said when she opened the door.

Her expression changed as soon as she saw me, and she neglected whatever was bothering her to smile, only pulling the same response out of me. It was hard to believe that she relaxed so instantly. It was almost impossible to believe that I did the same thing.

"Hi," she said, stepping out of the way and letting me in. As soon as I was past the door, she shut it behind me and headed back through to the kitchen. She glanced first at her wrist, then her eyes flicked to the clock on the wall. "You're here early."

I shrugged, watching her move around. "What are you doing?"

She looked at me as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, which, to her, it probably was. She switched her eyes back to what she was doing. "Eating breakfast - it's what us humans do."

I tensed slightly and looked at her, searching for any hidden meaning. She didn't even glance at me, meaning that she either didn't know what that sentence meant to me, or she did, and already knew my reaction. Her movements didn't hasten or hesitate, so I had to assume it was the first. She didn't notice my stress at the phrase.

"How about you?"

I started. "How - what?"

"Did you even eat anything this morning? It's so early, and if you're already here..." She was watching me now, sensing my off mood.

"Oh," I laughed, although I could tell even she thought it was forced. "I, er, already ate."

She raised an eyebrow, shocked. "What time were you up? I was barely awake when you got here!"

I shrugged, avoiding the subject. There was no need to tell her I'd been out practically all night, running. My hand retreated to my pocket to trace the outline of the glistening gem it held. She sat down, not taking her eyes off of me.

"So where is everyone?" I asked, in an attempt to get the conversation away from me.

"Dad's out with Charlie, and Mum's out...somewhere," she said thoughtfully, dropping her gaze to her cereal. She took a bite to get out of talking, clearly startled that I would ask. I was quite surprised myself, but it was the easiest thing to do.

I didn't push it any further, vague curiosity was something that I could fake, too much and it would me obvious I was avoiding something, and once she worked that out, well...

I heard a car pull onto the driveway. So did she. Her eyes flicked up, and then she was out of her chair,

shoving her things into the dishwasher and darting out of the room.

"Stay here," she hissed. I didn't have any intention to do anything different; so I did as she asked. When she was back, less than a minute later, she was pulling her hair into a ponytail with her shoes on and a jacket slung over her arm.

She grabbed my hand and flicked off the light, pulling me towards the back door.

"Come on," she said quietly, opening the door as quickly and quietly as possible and pulling me out just as the front door opened. She closed it again soundlessly, and pulled me quickly to the back of the small garden and through the high gate. She closed that as well and then stayed still for a moment listening. She dropped my hand and relaxed against the fence, relieved.

For a second, she smiled, hidden from sight of the house, then her eyes focused when she saw my expression. Her eyes jumped down to my hand then her, and a light flush appeared on her cheeks.

When she didn't show any sign of speaking, I did. "Ok, I'll bite, what was that about?"

"That was," she began hesitantly after a pause. "Er, that was...I just thought we should get going."

"Was there a particular reason we didn't use the front door?"

"Yes...seeing as we were already in the kitchen, and this way is actually quicker, I thought we'd take a short cut."

"If it's a short cut, have you decided where we're going for the day?"

Her expression froze for a second. "Well, I thought, maybe..."

"I'm not meant to be there, am I?" I guessed. "Your dad doesn't want me there?"

"Well...he doesn't want to think about everything too much," she began, hesitating.

"And I'm considered the main part of everything?" I guessed.

"Well, he's a dad, he's not supposed to like - I mean, he's meant to hate any guy who even looks at me. He's finally gotten home, he has the week off, so I doubt if he wants to think about what I'm doing, and besides-"

"Alethea, he kicked me out of the house earlier this week."

"That too," she allowed, falling silent. I could see she was remembering that evening in the same way I was, and I regretted bringing the subject back up.

"You really can't lie," I told her as a distraction.

She smiled. "I can if you give me time to think of an excuse."

"Nothing on the spot then?" I inquired. "That can't help much."

She shrugged. "It's fine, normally. I don't usually have to spend my time trying to think up excuses - I don't normally need them."

We were walking now, although I had no idea where to.

Alethea

We ended up in the park in town. I must have passed it a million times, but I'd never stopped to think I could come in. I don't even know whose idea it was to stop here, but seeing as the bench we were on was out of the way, I couldn't really think anything of it.

We'd barely said anything since we'd stopped, Kenneth sinking into his own thoughts and me watching the screams and squeals of the kids in the playground. I knew I'd never been up here as a kid, and I doubted Charlie had either. I'd have to get him here sometime.

"Is everything ok?" I asked eventually, getting slightly worried by how distracted Kenneth was. It made me think of how distant he got right before he moved on; and I wasn't ready for that. If I knew that it was going to happen, I had a chance, but I could kid myself into believe that I wanted it anymore. I didn't know if that was right or not...maybe it was something else. I just didn't know what it could be. I couldn't remember the look in his eyes before he moved on either, even though I had been so desperate to see it last week. I

knew that logically, I wanted to see that look now; but I couldn't quite bring myself to be ready for it.

His sapphire eyes flicked up to me for a brief moment. When they jumped away again, my heart thudded loudly. I knew, I honestly knew, that if he left now, things would be better than if he left later. But was it really that bad to just want a few more days? I didn't lift my eyes from him, even though he wasn't looking at me.

"I need...a favour."

The words sounded wrong. He looked up at me again, uncomfortable. I couldn't see what the fuss was. "Ok. What favour?"

He waited a while before he spoke again. "It's nothing really...but tomorrow..."

"Yeah?" I hinted.

"My...parents," he almost seemed to struggle with the word. "Are coming down, so I need to be there, and..."

"Kenneth," I said, relieved it was nothing more. "What are you asking? Do you want me there, or do you just want the day away from me, or what?"

"If you wanted to..."

I didn't say anything until he looked up at me. "Kenneth - I'll be there if you want. If you don't - I'll live."

"I need you there."

Diana

"Hey Di," Harry cooed when he came into the kitchen, Charlie in arms. I looked up in response, intent on my food, seeing as I hadn't been able to when he'd been here. Harry looked from my full bowel to the back door, but didn't quite connect anything.

Charlie was nodding off; rightfully too, he'd been screaming in the early hours today - how Alethea had slept through it was a complete mystery to everyone. Susan's car pulled up out front and I heard her hesitation as she got out. Then I heard the rustling of plastic bags.

She took her time up the drive, and peeked quietly around the front door when she reached it, relieved to see that Harry was no-where in sight. She bustled down the corridor and caught sight of me in the kitchen's corner as she pushed the bags of cigarettes under the sink.

She made sure that they were completely out of sight, then came and crouched down beside me just as I stretched. She scratched my ears and I leaned into her warm hand.

"You can keep a secret, right? Atta girl."

Kenneth

"Why don't we go somewhere else?" I suggested as the clouds moved rapidly across the sky, letting the sun pour down on us, again. It hadn't been out when we'd first got here, so I did think of what things would be like when the clouds uncovered it. It was worse than it should be, I was sure; but it couldn't be that hard to think of an excuse for an aversion to sunlight. It didn't exactly hurt, but it did irritate.

"Yeah, ok," she agreed, standing. "I'm starving - how about that little café down the road?"

I agreed, but only vaguely. I knew I should have thought of that, of course she'd be hungry, it was gone midday. It had been - what? - five hours since she last ate? I'd never really had to think about it before. Before Alethea, I'd only had to go and see someone, take my dose and be gone. She definitely pulled different reactions from me, mostly without me even noticing.

We were inside and sat down before I really registered anything.

"Huh, sorry?" I said, realising that she'd just asked me something.

"I said," she emphasised. "Aren't you going to get anything?"

I almost laughed. I stopped that reaction at the last moment, though. "No - I'm fine. I don't need anything."

"Not even a drink?"

Now that was tempting.

"Not now."

She shrugged and turned to the woman beside her, who took her order and then left. She gave me an odd look when she turned back.

"What?" I asked.

"What do you mean 'what?'" she asked. "First you completely zone out, then you decide not to order anything, and whatever it is you're thinking clearly isn't good. When was the last time you ate?"

About a hundred years ago?

I shrugged, knowing I couldn't be truthful. "A while ago. But I'm really not hungry." Thirsty, on the other hand... "And what do you mean whatever I'm thinking isn't good?"

She shrugged, unsure.

"Alethea," I said, still irritated when she didn't answer.

"You just have this look in your eyes." She reached across the table and pulled my face up, so that I was

looking at her. I was surprised by the motion. "And you won't look at me."

Alethea

I had realised, eventually, why his words had sounded so foreign to me back at the park. I was used to Kenneth ordering or commanding, the fact that he'd actually asked me to do something was a completely new concept.

Now I was sat in a run down café, with someone my mind knew I shouldn't be with, my heart said I wanted to be with, and some other part of me told me I should be scared of. Not to mention that I'd just practically told him about the glint in his eyes; the one that I had tried to convince myself I'd only seen in my nightmare. And that's still forgetting that I actually just physically touched him, after grabbing his hand so quickly this morning that he couldn't argue. Now I just wanted to...

I was getting in way too deep, and I knew it. Maybe this distance of his was good; I could get out before it was too late. Perhaps the only bad thing was the way that I wanted him to look at me, even with the

frightening sheen in his eyes, just because the swirling sapphire comforted me. The way that he kept trailing off into his own thoughts could be good...in the long run.

Conversation wasn't something that had ever really worked for us, but I had thought that mainly that had been my aversion. Maybe I'd pushed him too far, and now he was going to leave when I was falling. And I was ok with that. As long as it was before I was up too high.

Harriet brought my drink back and set it down, assuring me that my meal would only be a few minutes. I only got something light, after all, with all of the thoughts whirling around my head I didn't want to push my stomach too far. All of said thoughts had been sparked by one sentence.

'I need you there.'

He was exaggerating. Or lying. Or I'd misheard. It had to be. Not that I wanted it that way.

Jo

"God, I hate working in the kitchens," Lindsey complained.

I just looked at her. "Why on earth did you go into a job as a chef then?"

"It didn't seem that bad at the time," she explained, flipping her golden hair back, without lifting her eyes from the dish se was working on. "I didn't exactly think about the bustle and the heat when I was fourteen and at school."

"I suppose so," I agreed. She shoved the dish towards me and I scooped it up to pass along to Harriet, who'd just finished her quick break. "But surely you would have thought of the heat? It's ovens for crying out loud."

"I was as dumb as a stick in those days," she reminded me. She cursed when she burnt herself and plunged her hand into the water-filled sink. "Still am by the looks of things."

"I only come up here when George can't make it in - heaven knows where he is today - and I swear, every

time I come up, you find something different wrong with your life."

Harriet took the tray from me as Lindsey dried off her hand and set to work again. "It's easy for you to say - you've got a working, adorable husband and a kid! What do I have?"

"A million pound house that everyone's dying to live in?"

"About ten guys at a time throwing themselves at me, just to get the money. And I still end up working in this dump. To be honest, I only do it to get away from it all - I can never tell who I meet by chance, and who set the whole thing up to get at the cash."

"I knew a girl once," I remembered. "And everyone thought she was totally worthless - loosing a job every fortnight she was! Eventually, word got round as to why. She quit every time things didn't work out with her relationships. What no-one had realised before that was that everywhere she worked had a cute guy somewhere near."

"What are you suggesting? The only guy around here is George, and as far as I know, he's still on the go with that other woman. When he's not screwing her, he's working on his music. Even here he's thinking about beats and drums, you should hear some of the things he tells me!"

I laughed.

"Guys - check out those kids over by the door," Harriet said, scrambling back into the kitchen. "Aren't they cute? I can't see that lasting personally, he was so out of it when they came in..."

"H, do you always have to get involved in the personal lives of every customer?" Lindsey scolded. Harriet pulled a face and Lindsey gave in. "Go on, which two now?"

"Those two there," Harriet beamed, pointing.

I glanced over as well, drowning their babbles out. I couldn't understand their interest in the background of every person who walked through the door, but a little curiosity never failed to alight. My eyes jumped back again after a moment.

"I know them," I whispered to myself, interrupting whoever was fantasising. They both stared at me.

"What? Really? So what are things like between them? You really know them?" Lindsey rattled on, almost as if I'd admitted I was best friends with a celebrity.

"Yeah, last time I saw them, they were so tense."

"Oh, really? What else?"

"Well..." I snapped out of it and stared at my friends. "I'm not giving you gossip on my best friend's daughter - I don't think even she knows what things were between them at first."

"Really?" they both said eagerly. I looked at the clock on the wall as it ticked to the hour. I smiled.

"I'm off the clock," I informed them. "Bye girls."

I took the back way out, not needing Alethea's attention diverted to me when she looked the way she did.

Alethea

"Alethea!"

Having been just about to go through the front door, I was a little startled when my dad's voice erupted from the garage. He didn't exactly sound angry, but he definitely wasn't pleased.

"Yeah Dad?" I answered, poking my head wearily around the corner. He had all sorts of things in here, although it was mainly big machinery that made very loud noises when he turned them on. I didn't understand how someone who worked with computers could be so interest in woodwork, but considering how violent some of the machines could be, I'd never had it in me to complain.

"Is your phone on?" he asked me, not looking up from the pine he was crafting. "I tried to call you, but didn't get an answer."

"I'm sorry Dad, I left my phone at home." It wasn't a lie, although I suspected that the battery had died from being in my upstairs draw for so long. He stopped what he was doing and looked up to me.

"What if I'd needed to call you? Needed you here?"

I couldn't think of a proper response to that, so I swerved around it. The tone in his voice wasn't worried or panicked as it could have been. "But I take it you didn't?"

"No, but that isn't that point. What if something happened that I need to tell you? What if something happened that you needed to tell me? Did anything happen?"

"No," I replied.

"What have you been doing all day?"

I blinked, thinking. "Er...I was with Kenneth."

"Doing what?"

"Well, we went down to the park for a while. Then we went for lunch. And then I guess we went back to his." Diana slinked into the room through the side door, sneaking around Dad to crouch beside me.

"You guess?"

I nodded as my eyes trailed downwards. I had something tugging on the back of my mind, something that I should remember, and it was

annoying me. It had been there for quite a while now; but this was the first chance I'd had to really pay it any attention. The star-like eyes of my content cat met mine, and something clicked inside me and my recurring nightmare snapped into focus.

"Dad, I promised I'd call Kate today - and I-"

"Say no more," he allowed, turning back to his work. "Just have your phone with you next time."

I nodded and hurried through to the kitchen.

She picked up on the third ring. I hesitated for a moment, worried that I might be getting in over my head. "Kate? It's Alethea?"

"It's about that dream again, isn't it?"

Was I really that predictable?

"Yeah. It happened again today."

"Anything new? Or is it still shadows and things like that?" she asked. "I can't really say that much about it A. It might not even mean anything."

"It's just a dream - and I know that. I know that I've made the whole thing up in some dark part of my

mind, I just don't know why. It seems so...familiar. It's almost reminding me of something. Kate, I think I may be losing my mind."

"I'm sure you are honey," she replied. "Now tell me what happened."

I couldn't; not really. "It just...got clearer."

"And?"

I hesitated. "Well...he..."

"I need to know, A," she reminded me after a moment. "Just give me anything - anything at all."

"The reason I could move was because he was holding me," I settled for. "But it wasn't like you'd want it to be - it was too tight, so hard that it was unrealistic. And it didn't start like that. At first, I was fine, and then he was suddenly there."

"Ok," she considered slowly.

I didn't mention the additional lines of fresh bruises to my back that fell exactly where his arms had been.

Kenneth

"You're still dreading tomorrow?" Lizzie guessed. I nodded. "It won't be that bad. You'll see."

"It will," I told her. "It really will. I hate him, and he knows it. He just acts as if nothing's wrong and brushes everything off."

"So don't think about him. Think about Apasia - she absolutely loves you," she added, almost bitterly. She lightened her tone. "Besides, with Alethea there, he won't dare to try anything."

"We both know that he if wants anything, he'll get it - and that he can take her out of the problem in less than a second," I reminded her. I sighed, running a hand through my hair as I thought about it. "She shouldn't be coming. I shouldn't have said it...but I did, and now-"

"Bro, she calms you down. There's nothing anyone can do about that. Whether we like it or not, you'll be better off with her here, and it's not as Damien will do anything serious to you."

"Until she's unconscious," I added. She was about to say something, but I butted in before she could. "Face

it, it'll happen one way or another. By him or by me. And then when he sees me act how he wants, he'll just line me up for another lecture, and I'm not sure I can stand another telling off from him." I shivered. I still hadn't forgotten the last time I'd aggravated him - I was out cold for days.

"You know," she began quietly. "When he's here, with him being the way he is about you..."

"It's ok, I don't expect you to sacrifice what he thinks of you for this. We just need to make sure we act the way we used to, and everything will be fine. Neither of us can afford to loose that. If he stops being proud of you, we've lost every connection to him we have, and that could..."

"There's always Amos."

"True," I allowed. On any other occasion I would have viewed that as enough, but I couldn't right now. "But I haven't told him about everything yet."

"Have you told him anything?" she asked. I shook my head. "He doesn't know about Cameo?"

"No."

Alethea

"Can't sleep?" Mum guessed when I trudged downstairs late that night. I nodded drearily and she only smiled. I saw a slightly frantic look in her eyes. "Same here."

I smiled to, but only half-heartedly. As my hand reached into the air and tried to grab onto my mug, I realised it would be in the dishwasher at the moment, and went to get one out from under the sink. Diana started curling around my legs and pulled my attention away from the cupboard for a moment, and then she slid over to her water dish, looking up at me with hopeful eyes.

I filled it quickly, and when I turned back, Mum handed me a mug, although full of the hot chocolate I'd made. I thanked her, a little surprised by the gesture, and caught sight of the way she looked at Diana before I left the room. I wasn't entirely sure that telling Kate I had been loosing my mind was a lie.

Lizzie

Kenneth was just itching to get away; even I could see that. Apasia glanced at me and I swiftly looked away from him. Hovering just outside the door, I hoped beyond sanity that she hadn't - and wouldn't - connect what we were faking.

"So, son," Damien began, placing a hand on Kenneth's shoulder. He looked back at him, loathing but not moving. "I hear-"

"Damien!" I squealed, rushing out before things could get too far. He beamed at me, black eyes sparkling.

"There's my favourite girl," he said, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. Kenneth slipped out, shooting me a grateful look as he went. Apasia's eyes took in the motion, and she raised a smooth eyebrow at me over Damien's shoulder. I forgot about that.

Don't tell him, I thought to her. She didn't reply, and I hoped she'd follow through with it. Damien gave me an affectionate squeeze and then let go, consciously neglecting Kenneth's disappearance.

"How have you been keeping? I haven't seen you in years!" he exclaimed. I knew he wouldn't be this

animated once Kenneth got back, and not because of an extra presence either.

Alethea

I was waiting, down at the park, just as he'd asked, and he was late.

Not disastrously late, mind you, just late enough to make me think.

If he hadn't really meant this, or if something held him up, how would I know? Aside from his absence, obviously. I checked my phone again, although I knew it was stupid. He didn't have my number, and I didn't have his, and a month ago I would have shuddered at the thought of giving it to him. I shifted my weight awkwardly from foot to foot wondering if anything had happened. We'd arranged to meet here to make things easier for me, seeing as Kenneth wasn't technically allowed to my house, but it did make me nervous. I also had a clock on my phone to register every minute that went past.

I eventually caught sight of him when my eyes skimmed the scene before me. I could swear he

hadn't been there a second earlier. He smiled as he headed over to me.

"Hey," I greeted him. He looked solemn.

"Hi," he responded, not much feeling to his voice. He took my hand, and I felt my heart race at his touch. Really, I knew I'd probably sparked that off yesterday, but he still seemed special to have my hand in his as opposed to the other way around. I had been worried about what he thought of yesterday.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"This is going to be..." he began. It took a moment for him to decide on the words. "One heck of a day."

"It'll be fine," I assured him.

"That's what everyone keeps saying."

"Well, everyone can't be wrong."

He smiled; my soft gentle smile, and almost laughed. "It has been known to happen."

"Then think of it this way," I told him gently as we walked away. "I'm never wrong, so it won't be that bad."

"You're never wrong?" he repeated, not quite believing it.

I shrugged. "Give or take a few times...or a few more..."

Then he laughed.

It felt great to make him laugh, especially when he was already so stressed. What I hoped for didn't stay though, and as soon as the laughter left his lips the stiffness returned to his body. His laugh should have carried, and not cut off the way it did. Still hand in hand, we started to make our way towards the gate, me analysing his movements and expression.

"Kenneth?" He looked at me, although I could see the tension even clearer in his eyes than in his stance. He didn't say anything, he just turned away again. I turned his face back to mine. Where had this sudden confidence some from? "What's wrong?"

He laughed, once, just a throaty, harsh laugh. "Wrong? Nothing's wrong."

"Something's wrong," I decided. "Seeing as it's your parents we're going to see, shouldn't I be the one who's nervous?"

He didn't smile, he just let his hardened eyes scrape over my empty features. When he spoke, his voice was rocky, unwavering. "And are you?"

"Er..." I was surprised by the question. He didn't give anything away, he just waited for my answer; although, truthfully, I didn't know what to tell him. When I thought about it, I was glad to be able to say that I wasn't nervous - about meeting them. What I didn't want to admit was that the pulsing fear my body was trying to make me feel increased beyond reason when I thought of them. Over the past few weeks, I'd learnt to ignore that fear because there was no true reason for it; my mind just didn't want to accept that right now.

I wasn't nervous, but I was worried. By now he should have at least asked again, or said my name, or done something to make me answer. He just sat there waiting; it wasn't right. My worry was more for him

than me though, and I knew that wasn't what he meant.

"I'm...I'm fine," I told him, not sure whether it was a lie or not.

He shook his head. "You don't have to-"

"No," I said. "I told you I'm fine. I'm coming."

He still wouldn't look at me.

I wanted to know what was bothering him so much, what could be so bad about his parents? Sure, I was shocked that it was only him and his brother (and now sister) in the house, but what could possibly be so bad about seeing his parents once? There was something he wasn't saying; something that I thought I should know. I didn't know how, or why, but I knew I should know it.

Eventually, the silence was just getting ridiculous. We were almost at his house, but all I did was stop. He hesitated for a moment and then turned back to me. There was a glimmer of something in his eyes, but I couldn't be sure what it was. "Kenneth, what aren't you telling me?"

He just looked at me for a moment, thinking. When he spoke, his question was the opposite of helpful. "What do you mean?"

I bit my lip for a moment. "You're far too stressed for what you've told me," I explained. "Either you're just oversensitive, or there's something you're not saying - and to be frank, oversensitive doesn't fit you at all."

"It's nothing," he tried to say. I just looked at him, clearly disbelieving. "Yes, ok, there's something, but I really can't say."

Why did my stomach feel so terrible to know that? It wasn't shocking to think that there was something he didn't want to say, but I felt so much worse for it. What was this useless worry that tried to twist itself into my thoughts as constantly as he did?

Kenneth

The silence between us was terrible. I wanted to say something, but nothing would come. I just knew that I shouldn't have gotten her into this. What Lizzie said was true, having Alethea near me did calm me, but Damien could get rid of that in a second if he wanted

to; and he would want to. I felt stupid, not only had I brought her straight into this, but just last week I had been cursing because of what Lizzie could do - that looked tame in comparison to Damien.

I drank her blood. I held her until she was unconscious. I did it regularly. So why was I so reluctant to give Damien the chance? He didn't need to do anything - as soon as he wanted someone unconscious, they were, just like that. And he'd want her asleep so that he could get to me. I knew that, and I was still going to fall for it.

She stopped, falling back a few paces. After a moment, I turned back to her. Part of me wanted her to say she'd changed her mind - she wouldn't come. The other part of me was dreading it.

"Kenneth, what aren't you telling me?"

I immediately thought of the last time she'd used those words, when she'd woken up from that dream; the one she couldn't talk about. I remembered the raw suspicions that had burned in her eyes and how I had dashed that within a second.

"What do you mean?" I asked her.

"You're far too stressed for what you've told me," she informed me. "Either you're just oversensitive, or there's something you're not saying. And to be frank, oversensitive doesn't fit you at all."

"It's nothing," I assured her.

She raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, ok, there's something, but I really can't say." My jaw stiffened as soon as the words slipped out. What was that? My mind screamed at me. I hadn't meant to say anything, and the words had just come - if that happened just because I was around her, that was very bad; and I knew what Amos would say. And Damien. They'd just tell me to stay away from her, as they had before, and they would be right, but I couldn't want it. And with me, if I couldn't want it, I couldn't do it. But I didn't have to bring her into this.

"Do you still want to come?" I asked her, wishing more than I should that the answer was no.

"Of course," she answered instantly.

After another moment, we carried on; again, in silence. It was ridiculous really, but my thoughts were revolving around Damien. He didn't just drop in for no reason - and 'a little visit' certainly wasn't a reason worthy of him.

Alethea

I didn't say anything else as we carried on, lost for words. He hung back slightly when we reached the shadows of the house, and I caught up to him. He put an arm around me, something I would have despised on any other day; but today...

"Stay close," he murmured. He sounded totally defeated, almost scared. Today was different, I told myself sternly. And I knew it was right. There was something different about today, I could feel it coming. Every cell in my body was telling me that it wasn't good; but I was going to go through with this.

His expression changed the second we stepped through the door. It became hard and set, but I could see through it. In his eyes I could see the worry stirring. He was fine for a moment, and I looked

away at the woman across the room. I was stunned by what I saw.

Apasia's slight frame looked fragile by size, but was clearly anything but weak. The velvet cloths that clung to her were amazingly graceful, complimenting every part of her they touched. Her cave-black hair was pulled back from her features, and her glistening eyes showed a knowledge stronger than I would have ever understood as they fell over me. Her expression softened to loving as she looked to Kenneth, but he didn't relax in the slightest.

Then there was the man beside her; Damien clearly. He had midnight-black hair that was darker than hers, and even I could see the coolness in his eyes when he watched Kenneth. He didn't spare me a glance, and the muscles straining his thin shirt were unavoidably strong; although I could easily see he wasn't as strong as Amos. The strain in the air was impossible to ignore.

"Er..." Amos hesitated slightly, his eyes flicking between all of us, understanding the tension I could only sense. "I need to step out for a minute - my

truck's engine's been acting up, I was just in the middle of-"

"Say no more," Damien interrupted in a silk voice, barely glancing at him. "Leila, why don't you go with your brother?"

Lizzie seemed reluctant to leave, a new expression for me. She seemed like the sort of person who would do what she liked, no matter what happened afterwards. She trudged out after Amos. I remembered what Kenneth had said about having two names; although I still didn't quite understand it.

Lizzie

Apasia had her soot-black hair swept back today, revealing her full features. If it wasn't enough to stun Damien, who was so smitten with her he should have been unable to think of much else, although that was clearly not the case, it was defiantly enough to surprise the rest of us.

I had no idea what had just been said, so I didn't know what I was expected to do; all I knew was that he was probably the only person I could tolerate

calling me that. Amos held my gaze and I followed him out, shooting a sorry look back to Kenneth. When Damien suggested something, you didn't say no, no matter how highly he thought of you.

We were silent until we were out of earshot, both of us anticipating the inevitable. Kenneth was going to snap, I was sure.

"What are we doing?" I asked eventually, when we had to accept we weren't going to here anything from this distance.

"We're supposedly going out to the garage to check that my truck's working."

"Supposedly?"

"It's in top shape, I just needed to get out of the room. I didn't mean to drag you out though Liz."

"No problem," I lied.

Alethea

He was holding me too tight. His arm was like a vice around me, clamping me to his side. I could easily feel the tension in the air, but it was only the

distraction of the stress around me that stopped me from saying something. My eyes flicked from Kenneth's expression - hard, set and clearly despising - to Damien's. He couldn't have looked more comfortable.

"So son," Damien began, not taking his eyes from Kenneth. His arm tightened further around me and I had to shift my position slightly so that I didn't say anything. Damien's eyes hit me. "This must be the wonderful Alethea we've heard so much about."

I felt my cheeks flame. The way he said it didn't sound like a compliment in any way, but even so, I couldn't help the blush that lit. Kenneth stiffened as Damien's hard gaze moved back to him. I looked down for a moment, but when my gasp flicked back up, I felt rather than heard the low gasp that escaped my lips. Kenneth didn't look shocked at Damien's movement - he was right in front of us now - but I could still feel the tension in his hold; almost as if he was afraid I would slip away if he didn't hold onto me. Movement like that was impossible - it was so fast; so...inhuman.

Consciously, I knew that the thought was ridiculous; but it seemed to fit. My mind pushed the word through my thoughts as I watched them. They didn't say anything, but it was as though they were having a silent conversation. As much as I didn't want to, I looked away when a sudden stir from across the empty room caught my eye. I swear Apasia had been there a second before.

"Well, put it this way," Damien said aloud, assuring me that there had been a conversation I hadn't heard. How was that even possible with Kenneth right beside me? "Either I do it, or you do. You'll have to deal with things later anyway."

Kenneth looked at me. The regret in his eyes was something I wasn't used to - and I didn't understand why it was there.

Kenneth

She looked at me. She didn't have the fear in her eyes that I dreaded, but I still felt terrible as Damien's assessing gaze fell over me. Damien was right. I could either do this now and she'd forget it all - maybe even forget Damien himself - or he would do it. He would

just knock her out, and then I'd still have to think of some kind of explanation for it all to give to her later. I didn't have a choice and Damien knew it. That was the only reason he ran. He could have walked, could have saved me the trouble, but he wouldn't do that.

He wouldn't turn away until this was done, so I held her tight and drank her blood. She pushed away from me, but I didn't let her. I forgot everything for a moment and just focused on the warmth spreading through my body. I didn't want to stop when her aversion started to waver; I didn't even what to stop when she fell limp. It was only when I finally registered the siren in my mind that I even thought of stopping, and once I had the heat of Damien's eyes was burning on me.

I set her down and looked away from her and from Damien. Lizzie slipped into the room just when Damien's gaze got too much and I turned back to him; fully prepared for whatever he finally had to say.

Lizzie

I ran back to see Apasia gone, Kenneth glaring at Damien, and Damien glaring back. Althea was, exactly as Kenneth had expected, unconscious, not helping him in the least.

"Leila, love, come here," Damien said, not moving his gaze from Kenneth. I obeyed. "Do you think that you could give me a demonstration of you powers? You must have improved so much lately..."

"I really don't think I should," I began. "I would hate to seem-"

"Nonsense, go ahead," he encourage. "Your brother won't mind, I'm sure."

Kenneth looked ready to kill, but his eyes met mine, prepared. I held my breath, debating, but I knew I didn't really have a choice. I reminded myself I was meant to be acting the part, as if nothing had changed; and I was meant to be relishing in the opportunity.

"Well, if you insist."

Kenneth's eyes closed and he fell to his knees. He had the same reaction that he had always had before,

even if it was a different experience. Instead of the version of night I usually imposed upon him; this one was softer, kinder. It didn't completely cut off his senses, it just gave them light things to feel, and cut off his reactions, like always. I swallowed the guilt that dare to arise. Damien was ecstatic when he saw what I could do, and I only lifted it upon his command.

Kenneth's eyes refocused, slightly shocked.

He darted from the room, and Damien followed instantly. I was weary of what they would discuss, but I knew my presence would not go unnoticed.

Kenneth

I looked to her. She had to do this and I was ready. Aside from Apasia and her mind reading, would couldn't afford to leave any hints to Damien that anything had changed between us, and I already had her word she wouldn't say anything to him.

Lizzie's voice rang out as she fell back into the part she was supposed to be playing. "Well, if you insist."

I was ready for the silence and the darkness; prepared for the loss of sense and reactions - but what I felt was different. There wasn't silence; only the soft sounds that you hear late at night, the scuffles and scratched around you and the run of the breeze through trees. I didn't feel nothing, I could really feel the night air around me, and the darkness she showed me gave me nothing I would ever be able to experience in real life. I had all the sounds and feelings of the night around me, but what I saw was darkness; pure, endless black. And that was something I'd wanted to see only a short while ago. I had no idea...

Eventually, she lifted, and my eyes hit hers, burning with questions I couldn't ask.

I darted from the room, unsurprised when Damien followed. I only stopped when we were enough away from both the house and the garage to make sure we weren't overheard, and I wheeled to a stop, spinning where I stood to face him. He stopped, halting instantly, across the small space between us, but he didn't look away from me.

"I was going to mention this earlier, before you ran off," he told me disapprovingly, eyes scathing. "Although now I'm not so sure you'll handle it."

"What?" I asked, holding onto my last nerve. "What on earth could you want so badly that you need to interrupt everything, and lie to the rest of them about you reason for being here?"

"I just thought that you might be interested in knowing what my brother-"

"I don't give a damn about your brother, and if he's all you came to talk about then I suggest you leave!" I spat. "I have enough problems here without you butting in to everything."

"My, my, we are tense, aren't we?" he mocked, showing a little of his brother's spite through his mask. "You didn't seem that way just now. This girl of yours certainly has an influence over you, doesn't she?"

"Mind your own business. Why don't you go back to that darkened corner you call a home, and leave me

in peace? My dealings with Cameo are no concern of yours Damien."

"Well, that's certainly bold - I suppose you mean that in the same way they're nothing of your sister's business either?" he asked sarcastically. Then his tone turned serious, and threatening. "You listen here - I don't want her involved in your scrap of a life, and if you so much as dare to-"

"Thanks Damien, I'll remember that," I growled. "At least I care because she'd a blood relative rather than a valuable asset."

He smirked. "We all have our perks."

"I suggest you get away from me before mine start to show," I advised.

"Gladly," he consented. "I would love to be rid of you all together, were it not for my brother's wishes."

I glowered, before letting a false smile show through my expression. "I always knew you didn't have the guts to challenge him."

"Not at all," he assured me. "I just wouldn't want to interfere with progress. That girl you've found is certainly something. My advice is that you turn her over to him before you get in so far you'll regret it."

"I'll bare that in mind."

"You'd better."

Alethea

My eyes flickered open. My breaths came quickly. My heart beat hurriedly.

The feeling was gone. I didn't have an irritating pull on the back of my mind telling me that I had forgotten something; and I remembered the inspiration for my shadows nightmare.

I really remembered.

I knew why the face of both of Kenneth's parents had been incorporated into my dream on this occasion, and I recalled the way Kenneth hated that. In the end, I knew everything that had happened today, and the more I thought about it, the more I realised I knew about every other day. I understood the

irregular beating of my heart, and the fear that part of me wanted my body to feel.

As I looked into the sapphire eyes of the boy across the room from me, I didn't see anything different. His expression was just as clear as it had been before, his eyes still swirling. But he seemed so different to me.

My hand traced along my neck, and for the first time; I truly knew why.

I was thinking of changing the name of this story to 'Blood Stained Ruby'. The blood thing's kind of obvious, and the actual ruby is coming up soon, but I think the story is getting further from Kenneth and his 'problems'. Just leave a comment and tell me what you think - maybe even tell me what you think it should be called!

Thanks guys!

JJ

Chapter 7

Blood Stained Ruby Part 7

Why Remember?

Lucy

It was only after a subtle glance at the clock that I realised the whole of break had gone. Mark only smiled. "Do you know where Brad is?"

"Why?" he asked curiously.

"He was meant to meet me, but he..."

"Isn't here," Mark concluded. I nodded, throwing glances down the corridor. "If was lucky enough to get the chance to be with you, I wouldn't have stood you up."

I smiled. "Thanks Mark, that's sweet, but I'm sure he's just..."

Truthfully, I didn't know where he was. He'd never bailed before, and even when he was going to be a bit late he would at least text. I jumped slightly when the bell rang, but Mark just laughed. I joined in too after a moment.

"I'll see you later, yeah?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure," I agreed, still smiling as I turned away. I wondered where Brad was. I mean, I was sure he was fine, but still...maybe he was...

When I rounded the corner, I almost slammed into Miranda.

"Watch it," she hissed, pushing past me. I stared after her.

I turned back down the after a long moment corridor to see Brad staring after her as well. His expression was hard to read, but easy to understand.

"Brad, what happened?"

He just shook his head, looking past me. He shot one quick glance in the other direction and then turned as left; brisk but effortlessly.

Brad

"Miranda!" I said, pushing her back. She blinked her huge, innocent eyes, fluttering the long lashes surrounding them. At least, they looked innocent.

"What?" she asked, pouting slightly. Since when did she pout?

"What is that matter with you?" I asked, baffled.

Her expression fell a little. "What do you mean Brady?"

"Brady? Since when do you call me that? Since when does anyone call me that? Miranda, seriously..."

"Since now," she sulked. After a motionless moment she puckered her lips again and I had to physically step back.

"No Miranda," I said breathlessly. "No."

Her eyes started to glisten slightly and I hated to know that I was doing it. Seeing it when someone

else caused it was hard enough, but when it was because of me...

"Don't you want..." she trailed off. I looked away, but I knew her eyes weren't moving from mine. I considered a reply for a minute, but still couldn't look at her when I spoke.

"No Miranda, I don't want to just be a back up," I told her, finishing the sentence she hadn't had the guts to utter. Yes, I thought I wanted this, but not this way. "I don't want to be your fallback plan, I don't want you to stand here and kiss me when you're imagining someone else."

"Brady, what do you mean?"

"Don't do that," I snapped. Then I sighed, lightening my tone slightly and hoping that my voice didn't crack. She might need this explaining to her, but I didn't want to have to say it. "I am not..."

"Not what?" she asked gently, her fingers playing slowly with the collar of my shirt as she stepped toward me again. Where the hell was everyone? I

would guess she picked this classroom on purpose for privacy.

"I am not your 'Brady'," I told her, fixing my gaze over her head.

"But I bet you wouldn't mind if Alethea called you that," she muttered under her breath. Then my eyes fell the last few inches to hers.

"What so you mean by that? I very well would mind."

"If you say so," she told me, her eyes smouldering and her tone disbelieving. She must know that this wasn't Alethea's fault.

My voice became soft when I spoke again; I wanted her to hear the truth behind the words. "You know I'm here for you - I'll do almost anything for you, and you know that."

"Almost," she repeated bitterly.

I gaped at her for a second, registering the emotions in her eyes. She was disappointed, but not hurt. "Yes Miranda - almost. I'm not just going to do this so that you can imagine you're with some other bloke.

Especially not one who ditched you and left you the way he did."

She glared at me. I knew I was right, and so did she; so I couldn't feel any remorse at the statement. I only hated what the knowledge did to her, and there was nothing I could so about that. She didn't say anything else, just turning for the door. I caught her around the wrist before she left.

"Brad, get off of me," she whispered.

"Miranda, don't go."

Her jaw dropped in dismay, but the position didn't last long. "What do you want me to do? You don't want me here, you don't want me to go-"

"Randa, I do want you here. I just don't want you to be here because it seems like the easy way out. I'm not going to help you cheat yourself into something that's only going to hurt you."

She pulled here hand away from me and stalked out into the corridor. I cussed under my breath. Thank God this hall was abandoned.

"What are you going to do?" I called after her. She didn't pause, but I knew she heard me. "Just play with different guys until someone doesn't realise you're imagining them as someone else? Are you going to wait until there's someone that you can convince yourself is just as good as you thought he was? Because I have to tell you Randa, when that guy finds out he'll hate you for it!"

She just carried on walking away. I pursed my lips for a second, but then the words were flooding from them.

"Trust me - you won't get anyone you think is good enough! You ignored what he was really like, and built him up around everything you wanted - perfect matches like that don't exist!"

"You want a bet?" she yelled back, spinning on the spot, her eyes blazing. "So what have you been thinking about for the past five years then? I've seen the way your eyes pop when you see me - I know the looked in your eyes - and if perfect matches don't exist, why the HELL were you chasing me for all that time?"

Some of the colour drained from my face but I didn't let it stop me. The words were coming of their own accord now, but as soon as I heard them I knew they were right. "I did the same thing that you did - I imagined someone better than you were. At least I have the decency to admit it! I want you as the girl I've known for years - not this you. I want the one who's kind, caring, forgiving and a proper friend. Even then I know I've built you up - but at least I know that. At least I'm not going to sit there dreaming about you absolutely perfect - perfect doesn't exist in this world!"

"That girl's gone," she told me, looking away. "And she's not coming back."

"Not until she gets over this guy, anyway," I retorted. Her eyes returned to mine, all traces of tears gone. "And if that girl won't come back, I can assure you - I don't want anything to do with this one."

"If that's what you want," she said coldly. "I'm not going to force my company on you. I'd hate to let you down any more than I already have."

I swallowed, knowing there wasn't a way to compromise this. My eyes stayed on hers, neither of us showing anything through our masks of composure. I wished I could see what she was thinking, just so that I knew what to say.

"What a waste of five years," she told me harshly.

"I couldn't agree more."

With that, she turned and left, timing her departure for just when the bell rang and the hall populated. She slammed harshly into Lucy and I had to bite my tongue before I said anything I would regret.

Kenneth

I skipped last lesson, thinking. I had never been particularly interested in biology anyway; it wouldn't hurt to miss one hour. That was twice she hadn't been here, and, as far as I knew, Alethea had never missed a day before that. I pushed away from the wall and ran out of the school. There was five minutes until the bell anyway, it couldn't do any harm.

I thought I'd finally gotten through to her, past the defences; and it had looked like I was right too - for a while. She'd been fine on Friday; and Saturday had been near perfect. Sunday was...well, what I expected when Damien got involved; and today I simply hadn't seen her.

What changed?

Alethea

I remembered everything about Sunday with perfect clarity, and sure enough, when I got back home, there was another set of bruises along me back, exactly where I recalled. If I didn't push away every time he held me close, that wouldn't happen...but there was no way I could just stand there when I knew what was coming. I mean, when his lips pressed against my neck...

"Honey, it's for you," Mum said lightly, covering the phone with her hand. I looked at the device like it was a ticking bomb. "What do you want me to say? I could tell him-"

"Who is it?" I interrupted. She was only asking because I was supposed to be ill right now; although I was eternally grateful all the same. I knew I was overreacting; faking ill to get a day off school just to avoid someone couldn't really be classed any other way - but I'd still done it.

"Rick," she told me. I felt my whole body visibly relax. There was really no need for me to been paranoid anyway; Kenneth didn't have this number. He didn't have any number for me.

"I'll take it," I said, reaching out for the phone.

"Ok love, not too long though, ok?"

"Yeah, ok."

She was using that special voice; the one that she only used when I was sick. I felt kind of bad about lying to her, but I wasn't making it up when I told her I wasn't sure I could make it to school. She wasn't working flat out now, so there wasn't a problem with me staying home. Dad was still out at work, and I was currently sprawled across the sofa in the lounge. I hadn't quite meant to end up here all day, but it was

easier than fabricating some excuse as to why I had to be up in my room.

"Hey Rick," I said, lifting the phone to my ear as I sat up. I folded my legs up in front of me, but only after stretching them out - staying here all day made me stiffer than I'd planned.

"Hey, how you feeling?" he asked. "You're Mum said-"

"I'm fine," I told him quickly. My abrupt answer made him fall silent, so I changed the subject hurriedly. Knowing him, he'd be able to pick up that I was lying just from down the phone. "So, what made you call?"

"I haven't heard you voice since Friday. And besides, you can't spend two and a half hours on the phone to your 'girlfriend' one night, and then never call her again, can you?"

"I suppose not," I allowed. The way said it assured me he was still joking, although I was well aware that he might not see it that way much longer. "Do you have a girl at the moment though?"

He didn't answer straight away.

"Rick?" I insisted.

"Kinda," he admitted. I rolled my eyes, feeling stupid as I did it; but I still couldn't focus on anything when I was listening to him. I waited, but he didn't say anything else.

"How can you 'kinda' have a girlfriend?"

"You can't," he admitted. "I mean, technically we're still together, but we never see each other or anything. It's all fine at school and things and we get on fine, but out of school we never talk. We both know it's over, and neither of us are that upset, we just haven't gotten around to...finalising it yet."

"That's an odd way to put it."

"Yeah, well...how about you? Any guys?"

"Who do you think you are to ask that?" I demanded, laughing; but I was trying not to think about it for more reasons than one.

"Oh come on," he moaned. "I told you - it's only fair."

"You said it of your own free will - I'm not obliged to anything," I reminded him. Even thinking about

Kenneth didn't make me feel the same way it had before when Rick was laughing with me; or begging as the case may be.

"But I'm curious-"

"And I'm secretive, so drop it." Something in my tone made him stop, but he didn't ask anything else, leaving me to scramble for a subject before he could speculate too far into my 'boyfriend' troubles. "So...what are you up to at the moment?"

"What? Do you mean right this second?" he asked. "Damn!"

"What?" I asked quickly. I heard something flicker on in the background.

"My biology teacher wants us to watch this documentary tonight," he told me. He sounded bored stiff, and he'd only just turned it on. "He'd gonna hand around questions tomorrow and if you answer enough right - to prove you've seen it - you get out of homework for the next month."

"Good deal," I allowed, realising that he'd have to go in a minute.

"I guess. But it's still two hours of absolute trash before that. I could be out playing football or something right about now."

"You'd be on your own if everyone else watched the 'trash' though."

"I guess - wicked!"

"What?" I asked, slightly worried.

He laughed. "I didn't realise it was going to show us this! It's telling us abut how animals hunt - that deer just totally-"

"Ok," I said quickly.

"Why don't you turn it on?"

"Uh - because I'm not in your biology class? I don't need to watch it."

"True," he allowed, his voice becoming quieter. "But my parents don't know that. If they think I'm talking to you for school, I'll probably weasel a few more hours on the phone. Besides - I don't want you to go yet."

My heart fluttered, just slightly, to here that. I knew it wasn't anything serious; but after everything with Miranda, and then having to keep things from Brad - and I couldn't be with Lucy enough for her to get to know me that well - it just felt good to know that there was someone who hadn't changed throughout all of this. When I looked at my Dad whenever I got back from being with Kenneth, I saw the same look in his eyes; and Mum had it too. And I'd barely even been with Charlie over the last few weeks...

My hand reached for the remote before I made a conscious decision. "What channel?"

"Just channel two," he told me.

As soon as I turned it on, I saw the paralyzed body of a shrimp being dragged (a lot like a dead human body in movies) under a rock into a small, shadowed space. All I saw of the creature that stunned in was one, huge claw. I couldn't help but laugh.

"That was certainly..." I began. I couldn't find the right word. Freaky? Random? Scary? Odd? Just what I needed?

"Did I mention it's meant to be more than a little bizarre?"

"No, but I worked that out for myself," I laughed.

Miranda

"Right, that's it - I can't take it anymore!"

My face was completely expressionless as Mom slammed her book back down on the table. I didn't move, but only out of the pointlessness of the motion. After a short while, my gaze wandered up to meet her. My eyebrows raised at the sight, god she was mad. I didn't have it in me to be surprised at her outburst, but then again, I didn't have it in me to do anything any more.

Her eyes were focused, flaming, on me. She was obviously expecting me to say something, but I just didn't care. I returned my attention to the cereal in front of me, although my hand was simply moving the spoon around the bowel, never lifting anything to my lips. The lips that Brad had refused. My hand shook.

"Miranda!"

I groaned inwardly and looked back up to my mother. I appraised her position for a moment, and knew from the sternness in her expression that she wouldn't let this drop. Whatever 'this' was.

"What Mom?"

Her eyes softened for a moment. "Love, come on, you have to tell me what the matter is."

I blinked and looked away.

"Miranda, what has been going on?" When I didn't say anything she continued. "You used to be out all of the time, with Alethea or Brad, and then Kenneth, but you're never anywhere anymore - you're just around the house, wallowing in self pity. I mean, honey, what changed?"

"Kenneth," I muttered under my breath. I tried to make it sound angry, but I still couldn't feel that way towards him. I still wanted him.

"Ok honey," she said, sitting opposite me. She went to put a comforting hand over mine, but I moved it away, glaring at the table. "Boys come and go, that's

how life is. It's not worth all of this - what happened to the others?"

I gritted my teeth. Of all the people in the world, I didn't need my Mom to tell me this. And Kenneth was worth more than and 'ok honey...'

"I never see Brad around here any more, and God knows it's been a millennium since Alethea visited-"

"They've moved on Mom!" I yelled at her. My eyes were on hers now, and I could feel them tearing. "Alright? Each and every one of them - they don't need me. They have better things to do with their time."

"Now sweetie, I'm sure that's not true."

"Brad doesn't want me, at all. He's lusting after the new girl at school. She doesn't want anything to do with me because Alethea got to her first. Even though she's been lying to her since her first day."

"I think you're exaggerating hon," she told me gently, trying to meet my fallen gaze. "Alethea wouldn't do that to you."

"She would," I promised coldly. "She has. She's too busy to spare me a glance now she's got him."

"Got who love? What do you mean?"

"I don't even know why she bothered paying me any attention before, but now she's got her guy, it's all perfect and wonderful. A lovely happily ever after, never mind the friend who got left behind."

"Miranda, who?"

I shook my head and the ground and pressed my palms into my eyelids before the tears could spill.

"Miranda, I can't help you if you don't tell me-"

"Kenneth, Mom!" I shrieked. I moved my hands and my vision focused just long enough for me to see her expression. "She's got Kenneth. He dumped me for her and she barely even notices me any more. She's too caught up in everything he does. And Brad's after Lucy, who's with Alethea, so he's against me too..."

"That's doesn't sound like..." she mumbled, unsure and weary. I groaned and stood up, heading for the door. "Miranda - wait."

I ignored her.

"Miranda!" I stopped in my tracks but didn't turn around. "You listen hear young lady - I don't care what you think is going on between you and your friends - you don't walk away like that, you understand?"

I was shaking and my voice was lost.

"I said, do you understand?"

"Yes Mom," I told her through my teeth. She didn't even bloody care. I never thought she had.

"Miranda, honey," she said softly. I heard her stand behind me, but she made no moves to approach. "Listen love, I've been thinking..."

I just stared ahead, trying to focus on something other than the longing I still felt for the guy everybody forgot. Brad told me to forget him. He didn't. He didn't care what Kenneth had done...

"That maybe you should move back in with you father."

My whole world stopped. I whipped around. "What? Mom - no."

"I mean, you're clearly not coping with any of this, and perhaps being away from it all would make things easier. Having to juggle everything around work is hard enough - but my job's on it's edge. Everything's been crumbling since I've been worried about you baby girl."

I just looked at her, clear disbelief showing in my eyes.

"Honey, I need this job - you know that, and if I can't keep it, I don't know how we'll pay for anything. It's better for you to go with your Dad anyway, he's safe and secure moneywise, and he's always been-"

"No, this isn't about me," I said, shaking my head. "This is about that guy isn't it? This is about George!"

"No, baby girl, how can you think that?"

"You're job wouldn't need to be so fragile if you dated someone with an actual career! You say you worry about me, but you're not here every other night, and I don't have to be a genius to work out what you're

up to. Even when you are here, he is too - I bet this was all his idea to start with! Get the teenager out the way so you can have some fun."

She didn't say anything.

"Just because you want to chase after idiots who will never make it in music, doesn't mean you have the right to uproot me Mom."

"This isn't about that - I really think that this is what's best for you."

I scoffed. "And anything else you get at night is just a bonus, right?"

"You were almost begging to go with your dad a few years ago, hon-"

"Well, then you're a few years off the mark - I was nine years old Mom, I didn't know what I wanted and what I didn't!"

"But do you know now sweetie?"

I gaped at her. "Of course I know what I want!"

"Do you know what you're going to do with your life? Do you have a backup plan in case that doesn't work?"

Brad's words slashed through me even though they were being repeated in a different voice.

"Do you know where you'll start? How you'll start?"

"Mom stop it! I don't need a life lecture right now, ok? I don't need to stand here and have you tell me that Dad would be better off - it the heart of London no less - just because you want some extra time with your boyfriend!"

"Listen to me - you are going, and that's the end of it. Your father's aware of it all, and it may interest you to know he's ecstatic he's going to see you again, for more than an afternoon."

"So - what? You sorted this all out already? Am I the last to know - does what I want have no effect on this at all?"

"Not this time, love. I know this will work out, you just have to go through with it."

I turned away and ran from the room, pelting up the stairs as the tears ran from my eyes. My Mom was kicking me out. My friends hated me. The guy I thought I loved was over me. And now I was moving to the smoking buildings with crime rates and publicity that went through the roof.

Alethea

So I watched the documentary, listening more to Rick's narration as opposed to the proper one, and laughing at every available opportunity. The laughter got easier as we carried on as well. I didn't think it could be so easy to calm down with everything that had been in my mind all day. And I still didn't have any conclusions about anything; only more confusion.

The programme was almost finished; but that didn't necessarily mean I would be getting off the phone as soon as it was done. Rick gave me exactly what I needed, even without realising it. It was hard to be worried when I heard his voice trolling down the line. I didn't have to admit, a few of the images got

quite graphic, and I was extremely glad that I didn't have Charlie or my parents in here with me.

"Now that was awesome," Rick said.

I smiled. My throat was sore from laughing, but that didn't mean I couldn't appreciate his ecstatic voice ringing in my mind. I couldn't think of another way to put it, some of the creatures on this show were beyond words. My smile froze in place when I saw the next contributor to the show.

"Spiders?" I asked, slightly worried.

"Yeah - don't tell me you're afraid of them?" he joked.

I frowned at the screen. "Is this exotic spiders that catch prey in weird ways, or..."

"Nope," he assured me. "This is just your everyday, household, web-spinning spider. It's a bit of a bummer to end the show on, but still..."

"I was afraid of that," I murmured, too low for the phone (or Rick) to hear. "How do you know?"

"I looked it up," he told me, not bothered.

I watched in silence as the spider flitted about across the television, spinning a web as it went. The speed was unrealistic. I felt my body stiffen - I knew what spiders did to their prey. I could hear Rick's harsh, anticipating breathing on the other end of the line, and, as much as I wanted to, I couldn't turn away. I watched as the line shuddered and the spider crawled out from its cavern, to go and hold its meal. I watched as it...

"Wow - drained." Rick's voice almost made me jump - I'd been so caught by what was on screen. He sounded so excited. I moaned slightly and shuddered against the sofa's cushions. "What's wrong?"

"It's gruesome," I told him.

"You mean, you can watch a pack of lions tackle a deer to the ground, but you can't watch a spider eat? Well, drink."

"It's blood," I said, disgusted, and trying not to think of any relevance to what had been worrying me for the past three days, or what had been going on for so many before that. "It's just - Rick, it's drinking blood!"

"Yeah, and?"

"Don't you find that," I paused, searching for the right word. "Don't you think that's kind of grotesque?"

"Whoa, fancy! Dim it down a bit, would ya? French was never my strong point."

"It's disgusting."

"Not really," he told me.

"Yes, really."

"How?"

"It is drinking blood," I emphasised, shivering slightly despite myself. "How can you not see that as horrible? I mean - eating something, sure, that I understand - but drinking from it?" My voice was getting more and more strangled with each word.

"But how is it any different? The loins strip their prey and eat the meat, the fish - well, they're weird I'll admit - but it's all nature. That's how they live."

"But..."

"It's not as if they got much of a choice in this, A. They didn't choose what they wanted to be in their next life after they died - no-one does."

"You don't know that. I didn't know you believed in reincarnation."

"Neither did I until I said that," he told me. "But they got even less choice in it if that isn't true - they didn't have karma on their side. Either way, they didn't necessarily want to live like that - it's do or die, and they're hated by most of the human population."

"Yeah...I guess so."

"You know, most of the girls I know would shriek the second there was any blood or gore involved. They'd be disgusted as soon as there was flesh and meat for anything. You only get worked up when we get to blood alone."

"Yeah well," I said, trying to shrug it off, although clearly not succeeding. "I'm not like a lot of the girls you know."

"I know you're not."

The picture faded and the credits rolled onto the screen.

"Not bad for biology homework, eh?" Rick asked, lighting his tone instantly.

"Uh, no, not bad at all."

Alethea

"Are you avoiding someone?"

"No," I answered, slightly too quickly. It was only when Brad stared at me that I realised the question was rhetorical. "I'm just..."

"Hiding?"

"No."

"So if I scream out that you're over here, you'll be fine?"

"No."

"Is this anyone in particular, or do you just not want attention?"

"I'm not-"

"Wow, chill. I'm only messing around," Brad assured me in response to my loud tone, which predictably attracted more attention than I would like. "I knew you were cranky on Mondays, but seeing as you took the day off..."

I pulled a face. "Hilarious Brad."

"Seriously though, is everything ok? You were here awfully early today..."

"So were you," I shot back, offended. I wasn't going to tell him that I'd left early, spinning off some excuse about a project to my parents in order to avoid Kenneth on the way to school. Even if I was, he wouldn't be impressed. It even seemed a bit extreme to me, but after yesterday's revelation...

He shrugged. "True, but I was doing football stuff. You just turned up. Hey Luce."

"Hey," Lucy replied, looking at Brad. Then she turned to me. "Kenneth's looking for you."

"Where is he?" I asked quickly. Brad laughed and I shot him a glance.

"So that's what this is about?" he guessed. "Can't say I blame you to be honest, but all the same, hiding won't get you far. Moving to Alaska would probably help, but..."

"Oh be quiet," I hissed. I pulled him in front of me. "And stand there."

"So," Lucy said, rocking onto her heels, searching for some kind of subject that didn't involve other countries, nonsense or hiding. She started up a conversation with Brad about some class that I wasn't in, meaning that I was free to think; something that I was trying to avoid.

I shuddered. Stood there, in the beams of the morning's sun, just outside the main school building in full glare of the heat, the shivers rolled down my spine. They stopped as quickly as they'd started, but the disgust at the thoughts lingered. He drank my blood. That was not normal, and it was very, very wrong. Brad was looking at me again, assessing.

"Are you sure you're ok?" he asked me, questioning my shakes.

I blinked. "I'm...as good as can be expected."

He obviously thought my response was a little strange, but didn't comment; although I did notice his eyes skating back to me more often than strictly necessary in the following minutes.

Eventually, the bell rang, and I breathed a small sigh of relief as everyone turned to the school. At least I knew he hadn't seen me yet. I couldn't keep this up forever, and I knew it, but I was positive I couldn't face him yet. I still didn't have a choice in this, and whilst I didn't want to have to admit it to myself, I had to confess that now my fear of what would happen when he moved on was gone.

It was only every day until then I was worried about now.

Kenneth

The pen in my hand shattered.

I knew she was avoiding me again. My eyes flicked across the room. The only people in here already were those who arrived early, none of whom paid me the slightest bit of attention. Before my resolve could

waver, I got up and sprinted for the door. They wouldn't have seen me move; human eyes were too slow for that.

I almost turned around as I headed out of the school. I wanted to see her, but that could wait; it would wait. I'd come back in a few hours. It wasn't my fault if I couldn't concentrate as much as I should on useless lessons - or on acting 'normal' for that matter - so why push it? I would be back though; she couldn't avoid me forever.

Lucy

"Are you sure you're alright? You don't want to go the nurse's office of anything?"

"Why would I want to do that?" Alethea asked me, smiling. Her expression was slightly forced, and her voice sounded too high. Something was wrong, whether she was going to say it or not.

"You just seem...distracted," I settled on.

She laughed. "Well I'm not sure the nurse would appreciate that. I don't think they make medicine for

you to keep your focus. Imagine it - whoever created it would be rich beyond belief."

"Uh-huh," I said dubiously.

She turned away from me as I looked at her, probably to hide the look in her eyes. I wasn't entirely sure what that look meant, but she'd seemed slightly frantic today. She almost jumped when the bell rang, and I notice the stiffness to her movements as she packed everything off. She wasn't her usual self; she was too animated.

"A?" I said. She turned back to me. I debated what to say for a moment, but in the end I just made a joke out of it. If I didn't know what the matter was, there wasn't a lot I could say. "It's just lunch - calm down."

"Yeah," she agreed. I wasn't sure whether she was agreeing with the statement or the advice. We left the classroom in silence. I'd given up on the possibility of conversation through periods one and two; deciding that she was probably better off in her own thoughts.

"Hey, how're ma girls doing then?" Brad asked, coming up behind us and putting his arms across our

shoulders. I moved slightly so that he could get between us.

"Well," I told him, smiling. "I'm doing fine..."

"And missy over here is still in her own world?" Brad guessed, squeezing Alethea's shoulders. Oh, why couldn't he do that to me?

"Pretty much," I allowed.

"What are you two on about?" she asked, sounding more like herself than she had so far today. "My own world? Is that some crazy way of saying I've lost my mind?"

"Yes Alethea, that's obviously what it is," Brad said seriously. "Lucy and I are talking about you being a nut in joking voices with you in earshot because we believe it's true."

"Well then," she concluded, pulling to a halt and stopping us with her. The spark in her eyes now had been absent all day long. "Maybe-"

"You should pull back to the schooling world? Great idea," Brad interrupted. We all laughed as we started

going again, swerving through the crowds in order to get to the canteen. I could see that Brad still wasn't too sure about her, but whatever was bugging Alethea had subsided for a while; even if it hadn't completely gone. I was curious about the strange looks she as getting from everyone around us though. Was there something wrong with her walking through the school with us? I was willing to admit, I didn't see her that often at breaks and lunches, but surely this wasn't that unusual?

We turned the last corner and her smile faded. She wasn't looking at us and she ducked out from under Brad's arms quickly, so quickly that it almost startled me.

"Uh, guys? I have to go - I'll catch you later."

"Where are you going?" I asked quickly.

"Uh...Miss Brooked wanted to see me, and I'm late."

She slipped back around the corner. I stared after her for a moment, baffled. I hadn't known her for that long, but even I could tell from the high pitch of her voice that that was a lie. It did worry me, not

knowing what was wrong - but if there was anything I'd learnt from being friends with Amber for all my life, it was that people are best left to tell you things on their own.

Brad looked after her for half a second too but then his eyes flicked away for a brief moment, to be lit with a dim understanding another moment later. I followed his gaze to see Kenneth. He looked up, catching sight of Alethea just as she disappeared. He straightened up from leaning casually against the wall, and headed over to us, not taking his eyes away from the spot where she vanished.

He looked past us for a moment and half gestured in the direction Alethea had gone. "Where was Alethea-"

"Don't know, sorry," Brad interrupted. I looked at him, shocked by the hardness in his expression. Kenneth's eyes narrowed, clearly disbelieving and full of distaste, soundlessly replying to the pure hate in Brad's. I didn't say anything, slightly scared. Kenneth's icy gaze was ruthless, but it was the shallow look in Brad's that worried me more.

Without another word, Kenneth left, stepping briskly past us dragging more looks that necessary from the students moving past us. Their trailing gazes quickly switched to us, but I turned to Brad before they could distract me.

"Why did you-"

"It's complicated," he told me quietly. Now most of the stares from the people around us had reverted solely to me; presumably because I didn't know what was going on. He looked me in the eyes when he spoke again, and I saw the sincerity backing up his words. "You don't want to know."

"But I-"

"Trust me."

I looked at him, but he just looked away. The stares and glances from everyone around us didn't startle him the way the surprised me, he looked as if he almost expected more. He gave my shoulders a reassuring squeeze and pulled me along again. What I hated the most was that I seemed to be the only one

who didn't know what was going on; it must be something to do with being new.

"Forget about it," Brad whispered. I looked down. He coaxed my face back up with his spare hand, the first still resting across my shoulders. "Hey. Smile."

Forgetting couldn't be that bad.

Alethea

I knew I was getting far too ambitious if I wanted to forget about Kenneth - although it had taken me most of the day to realise it. Maybe accepting the distractions as they came would be easier. Of course, that would be a lot simpler if I actually believed that he wasn't here today. Kenneth always missed lessons; he bunked off whenever he felt like it and still passed his classes, much to the annoyance of the 'rebels' of the year group. He only ever missed a whole day of school once, and I would count it as a miracle if the same thing happened twice while I was in his eyes. I laughed, Brad and Lucy beside me, trying to put everything behind me, at least for a little while.

Turning the last corner, my smile faded. There he was.

I'd known I'd been hoping for too much not to see him, but I was still shocked when his eyes connected to mine. I pulled quickly away from Brad, remembering how Kenneth could be about being with other people. I made my excuse and left, but not before I noticed how many people realised what was going on.

I swerved off the side corridor as I sprinted, causing anyone who wasn't already aware of what was going on to stare. This was futile, and I knew it - I just didn't stop until I dashed into the girl's bathroom and leant heavily on the door, catching me breath. That could have been it if it was empty, I could have just stayed there.

Except that that didn't happen because there were other people in there too. A few of the girls gave me odd looks, not fully aware of who I'd just seen, but I just moved and they trooped out.

"But what else could I do?" I heard a voice saying. I stopped breathing for a moment, realising how loud

it was and not wanting to be discovered, not when I knew that voice. I didn't go around the corner, I just prayed that no-one else came through the door for a few minutes. "It's not as if I actually earned that detention. I was only fifteen minutes late."

"Where were you anyway?" asked a second voice. I didn't recognise this one.

"What do you mean? You were there too," and third voice piped up.

"Not instead of the DT, dummy!" voice number two said. The two of them fell about laughing; high, peachy laughed that scratched at the air. "Why were you late in the first place?"

There was a slight pause. "I was hanging out."

"With who?"

"Gwen."

"Gwen!" the other two exclaimed, shocked. "Really? Oh my god. She's like, the coolest. I wish we could hang out with her. How did you get in? Her gang is

dead exclusive - can you give us some tips? I would so love-"

"Dim the cheeriness," the first voice instructed impassively. "That's one thing that will definitely keep you out. Besides, it's not official yet. I only hang around with them occasionally. I don't think I could put up with them much longer than that."

"I know what you mean, they're total Goths. It must be so depressing to be with them too long."

"No, it's not that. They're just so...regular. Everyone thinks they're these amazing teens who do everything - truth is, it's a few fags and that's about it. I'd rather be with different people - the ones who actually break the rules as opposed to just dissing them."

Someone's phone rang and the girls started squealing again, all except my friend.

"Oh - it's Jamie! I have to go."

"I'll come to - how about you Miranda?"

"Nah. I'm cool here."

"Suit yourself."

I heard the scuffling as the lowered themselves down from their perches on the sinks, and their footsteps as they headed over. Thinking quickly, I opened the door and ducked out for half a second to make it look as if I was just coming in. The corridor was deserted, but that didn't mean I had the guts to wait for fate to bring me into Kenneth's path again. It was a small school after all.

Chelsea and Kylie looked at me like I was dirt, obviously a habit from being behind Miranda for too long. The brushed past me and out of the door, leaving me to stare after them for a moment. I shook my head. I had more important things to worry about.

"What do you want?" Miranda asked, scraping her eyes up and down me as I walked around the corner and further into the room. I was too stunned to answer for a moment. She hadn't spoken to me since... The look in her eyes told me she didn't see me as I wanted her to, and the turned to the mirror after

a moment, picking up one of her things that littered the counter. She'd never been into make-up before.

"Please tell me you weren't with Gwen?" I blurted out desperately, speaking the words before I realised what I was going to say.

"Were you listening to me?" she asked, astounded, turning back to face me. Her mascara stained the counter where she brushed against it. She looked outraged.

I took that to mean she was. "Miranda, you're better than that!"

Her eyes narrowed for a moment, but she obviously decided I wasn't worth it because she turned away. She shrugged her shoulders, not bothered. You only hung out with them if you met their criteria, and that criteria concerned smoking - among other things - something we'd both sworn we'd never do.

"Just last month you said you wouldn't be seen dead with them!"

"Just last week you said you wouldn't be seen dead with Kenneth!" she snapped, glaring.

"That was four weeks ago," I muttered. She'd been too obsessed with him after that to give me the time of day. "And besides, it's not as if I have a choice in this."

"Oh yes, you looked so distraught on Friday," she said.

"Friday was..." I sighed angrily, hoping I hadn't picked that up from him. Was it really only Friday that everything had seemed fine? "Things change."

She twisted the cap back onto the tube she was holding and laughed, one, harsh, disbelieving laugh. "Obviously not for you. You're still hiding aren't you? Still trying to-"

"I'm trying to stay away from something I didn't want," I interrupted, annoyed. I tried not to flinch at how weak it sounded, but hiding was weak, and there wasn't another way put it. "Miranda, I-"

She interrupted me in such a calm, collected manner that it was hard to believe she was furious as she looked from her voice. "Do not stand there and tell me you're sorry - I don't want to here it. Everything

you said to me was just plain harsh, on top of everything else that you did - and no words can make up for it." She stopped for a moment to look over to me. "I don't see why I shouldn't just push you out of here and leave you to face what comes."

"What do you mean everything I said? You never let me-"

"Don't act dumb with me!" she snapped. "I would offer you the proof of it all, but I don't want my phone contaminated by your touch, thank you very much. I can barely stand you breathing my air, anything else could be fatal."

"The text messages," I remembered under my breath. She still heard.

"Correct," she told me. She picked something else up from the sink and start applying it. "Now if you don't mind - I'd appreciate a bit of peace in my lunch break."

"It's a free building," I said hotly. She ignored me.

Lucy

"I bet if I asked anyone else what was going on - they'd tell me in a second," I said under my breath.

"They probably would," Brad agreed, tired of my bad mood. "If I didn't happen to be able to make sure they didn't."

"What are you on about now?"

He smirked. "I have my ways."

"Maybe I'll go ask Mark," I murmured. He scowled.

"Luce, just drop it," he said. "It's really not that interesting."

"So why won't you tell me?"

"It's not worth your time-"

"It certainly looks like it is," I cut in. "Everyone else knows about it - and they seem interested. I wanted to know too."

"Stop acting like a five year old," he muttered. I glared at him and turned away. He caught hold of my arm. "No - come on Luce, I didn't mean it."

"Sure you didn't," I muttered. No need to mention I'd only ever heard those words as a joke, and in my father's voice.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Somewhere where I don't have the entire student body staring at me because of something you don't want to say," I informed him, pulling away.

Alethea

"Miranda - listen to me," I said, almost begging. She put her things back in her bag and turned away from the mirror, her eyes skating over me as if I was just there for decoration. She walked past me but I grabbed her arm before she reached the door. "Miranda."

"Don't touch me," she snapped, jerking back in disgust. "If you want to hide, fine - waste what every other girls I know wants - just don't expect me to stay beside you through it."

"Give me one good reason why I should want this," I said. She looked at me for a moment. "I could tell you

something that would scare you away from him for good." My stomach churned just to remember it.

"Well it's great to know the two of you are sharing secrets - but I don't need to hear them." I knew I wouldn't have told her anyway; I couldn't have.

"Just give me one reason why I should want this at all." Even if she didn't know as much about him as I did, she had to notice that I was practically being kept away from everyone else like this; didn't she? She must she how much I hated it all.

She shook her head and stepped back, slipping out of the door just as the bell rang.

Kenneth

"Did you bunk off last period again?" I asked. It was vein curiosity and I couldn't help it. She'd always seemed like such a...school girl; I never thought of her as someone for bunking, a view that I'd expressed once before. Plus, I need a light way to start some kind of conversation.

"What's it to you?" she asked hotly, pushing away from her locker. I looked at her for a moment, surprised, but followed.

"I'll take that as a yes?" I said, although it was more of a question than a statement. I didn't get an answer, but I had to pick up my pace slightly to keep up with her. She wasn't looking at me. "Alethea?"

She wove in between the crowd of people heading for the gates with ease and speed. No-one tried to stop her, and I waited until we were out of view of the school before I spoke; although I wasn't sure leaving her in her own thoughts for that long was wise.

"Alethea?" I said softly. She didn't say anything and didn't look back. My jaw flexed and when I spoke again, my voice was harder. "Alethea..."

I didn't know what I was asking; whatever it was, I doubted if I'd get a helpful answer. Either way she ignored me. I could almost feel the tension coming from her, and it was stretching my patience thin.

"Alethea!" I said sharply. She flinched slightly and looked down, but only slowed a fraction. "What is the matter?"

Her jaw flexed as well but she still didn't say anything. My eyes flashed around us, but there was no-one else here. Before I even consciously decided to do it, my hand was on her arm and I spun her around to face me. She shook slightly, regaining her balance.

"Alethea, say something."

"What do you want me to say?"

I just looked at her, waiting.

"We've been here before," she reminded me, keeping her eyes on mine. "And right after that, you..." She trailed off and left the sentence hanging. Her eyes dropped. I remembered all too clearly what had happen right after that, although she shouldn't.

"I what?" I asked her. She shook her head, letting her hair fall forwards across her expression. I left that question and moved on to something else. "Why were you avoiding me today? Again?"

She didn't answer.

"Even after you said you wouldn't, and I thought you knew not to? Why?" She didn't answer; she barely even moved. I still couldn't see her expression. "You know what? I stand by what I said last week - if you actually said something once in a while, you'd feel better. Not to mention how helpful it would be to know what you were actually fuming about day to day."

"You want to know what's bothering me?"

"Well why else would I ask you?" I asked, irritated.

She looked up and brushed her hair back with her spare hand. My expression hardened in reply to the refreshed defence in her eyes, but this wasn't as bad as it had been before.

"Do you want the simple version, or the complicated one?" she asked sarcastically; a tone I hadn't heard in her voice before.

"I honestly don't care as long as you answer something."

Alethea

I looked at him for a moment, recognising the look in his eyes. It wasn't the glint that I feared - the need for blood - but it was the look that should scare me; the one that warned me to answer him. Having heard my name so many times today in the tone that matched the look, I could easily see I was pushing my limits.

I looked down after a moment, and pulled my arm back from his grasp, relieved that it was lighter than usual. I turned away, but didn't move further back.

"Alethea, will you just tell me what the matter is?" he asked, annoyed. I didn't move, more cautious than I would have been before. "It's not as if you can't talk or anything, is it?"

"What do you want me to say?" I asked again, my voice quiet. One of my hands had been running through my hair, but it stopped where it was and just began the twirl the strands around my fingers.

"I don't know - just tell me something!"

My eyes jumped to any direction but him, frantic. "Oh god Kenneth I don't know! Everything's wrong."

"Everything?" he asked, his voice sounding bored, more so than usual. "What do you mean?"

I gave in, but still couldn't look at him. "Miranda hates me."

"And?" I flinched; his tone was so cold. "I thought that had already been and gone. You know she's only trying to make you feel bad, and it looks as if it's working. She's not worth it."

I felt my expression change to one of concentration. My lips parted slightly and I looked at him. He'd never said that before or anything like it. His voice was so sincere and caring, it almost didn't sound like him. I stepped back towards him without realising it. I wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't come to my lips.

"Is there another part to everything?" he asked softly, his eyes meeting mine. I didn't realise how close we were until he brushed my hair back so that he could see my face.

I looked down. I couldn't say it; I didn't know how. Everything I'd thought about him seemed so farfetched; so unrealistic. I knew it was true even if my mind didn't want to accept that. None of it seemed possible, no matter how many times I told myself that it was real.

After brushing my hair gently back, his hand curved around my cheek for a moment, but then glided slowly to my neck. I tried to think about what that could have meant to me if I didn't understand...

I shivered.

He pulled his hand quickly away and stepped back, looking down. The motion was so smooth it almost seemed imaginary; but I couldn't be so sure whether that was right or not now. He opened his mouth to say something but closed it again after a second of silence. I looked down as well, trying to work out whether my heart was hurrying because I didn't want this; or because I did.

After a minute he spoke, sounding more distant than I expected. "You're cold, we should go."

I just nodded, trying to work out what the thoughts racing through my mind were trying to tell me.

Kenneth

We didn't speak again. By chance, no-one was there when we arrived at her house, although neither of us had really spoken about a destination as we moved. My hands were deep in my pockets, my right one brushing the icy surface of the gem there. I watched her. I hung back when we got through the door, thinking; but she didn't comment. Alethea half-glanced at me but then turned away, heading upstairs.

After a long while, I followed her up.

Alethea

It was a glistening, blood red.

"Kenneth..." I trailed off, not able to put what I was thinking into words. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the flawless gem in my hand. I turned it over, my fingers running across the edges of the perfectly cut stone. The edges were sharp, and the faces

nothing short of perfection, the crystal in the shape of a heart.

He smiled, but there was something hidden in his eyes when he did. He unclipped the clasp of the silver chain from which the crystal hung, and stepped behind me. The coolness spread through me when I let it go and the gem touched the skin of my chest. My breathing lightened as it rested there. I looked down and turned to face him. My eyes glided up.

"What..." I began, but I couldn't put the question into my words.

"It's nothing," he promised.

I pulled it away from my chest and rested the stone in my palm, watching it shine in the light. "It's not nothing, it's..."

"Pure ruby."

"Pure?" I asked under my breath, shocked. I shook my head. "No Kenneth, there's no way I can-"

"Why? It looks beautiful on you."

I blushed. I watched the way his eyes focused on my blood-rushed cheeks and turned away, heart racing; and this time I knew I was the fear.

All of those other feelings were gone now. I understood why I wanted to feel nervous around him, and why my hand always ran across my neck when I awoke from my nightmare. I knew what made my heart race when he had that glint in his eye; and I even realised why Diana acted the way she did around him.

This couldn't be happening. Why was I still here? I knew what he was, but I was still smiling and happy when he uttered even a single compliment to me. I blinked a few times and realised that it was probably the first one, too. I risked a glance over my shoulder but regretted it instantly, catching sight of the familiar glint in his eyes.

I stepped rigidly away from him, although I knew it did little use. I was just going to be unconscious for another night. It was cold-blooded, horrifying, ruthless, disgusting and wrong. But that didn't stop him. I almost couldn't believe that I'd been warming

up to him; and it hurt to know that it was still happening, even when I knew this. I really couldn't believe that this had been going on and I hadn't remembered. I mean, how could I forget something so - so vile?

He was behind me in a second. I gasped at the sudden movement, but it only sent my heart into another sprint. I couldn't look at him. I kept my eyes downcast. I tried to step away again as his arm started to snake its way around my body, but he held me to his side and then stepped in front of me. I tried to pushed away; briefly, but I felt the pressure across the bruises already littering my back and shied away, straight into him as I had before. His arms tightened around me and I moved my head, my hair concealing my neck from his view.

I gasped as he moved, tipping me back and holding my up, so that my hair fell away. His lips skimmed over my skin and hovered, halting, for a second. He kissed my neck gently. That was enough to pull and irrational reaction from my heart, and it hurried in

pace, teasing him. I felt the smile on his lips as he bit easily through my skin.

I felt the strength leaving my body; and knew it was falling limp. My eyes flickered closed for a moment, but I forced them open.

He pulled back for a second and looked into my eyes. The swirling sapphire I saw was mystifying.

Then I remembered something.

When I thought about every day before now, I remembered. I could recall exactly how it had all happened - starting with that very first afternoon. He promised me that I wouldn't remember; and he'd been right, and it had stayed like that - for a while. Just because things had changed didn't mean that they should have.

He didn't know I knew.

Kenneth

She was so simple when she was asleep. Whatever she thought when she was conscious showed on her expression, because there wasn't a need to hide it.

She was different, Amos had been right all along. When he asked me if I liked her more than the blood, I hadn't been able to take him seriously - she had just been another girl; another distraction. Now it wasn't like that.

Being able to see how she really felt didn't explain to me what was bothering her though; and that was the main problem. She moved slightly, her hand twitching towards the stone on her chest. My eyes fixed on it for a moment.

Well, Cameo would know now. He'd have felt it the second the ruby touched her skin. And I regretted it in that same second. At least if she wore it he couldn't find her. As long as she kept it on; she'd be safe. He knew it had happened, he always did, but he still had to wait for me before he could do anything. That was one comfort; but at least it was something. He might be able to find me, I supposed, but I'd face that when it came.

She started to stir, turning her head into my hand. As her eyes began to flicker, I pulled my hand back. Her lips turned down slightly at the corners.

Alethea

When I opened my eyes, I was surprised by how close he was. I sat up quickly, my eyes slightly wide, and leant away a little. I thought a saw a little hurt light in his. My hand rose to stroke my neck again, but instead of stopping the motion I merely ran my fingers over the cool silver of the necklace, my hand resting above the gem. After a second's decision, my hand closed over it and I started to pull it away from my body.

"Kenneth," I said, looking down. "This is just-"

"Don't," he said quickly, his hand appearing over mine. He pushed it gently back to where it had been before and then prised my fingers away from the stone. I looked up at him, my hand relaxing in his. "Keep it on. Keep it - it looks stunning on you, really."

I shook my head and moved back slightly. "Kenneth - how much did this cost you? I can't."

"Surprisingly less than you think, trust me," he murmured. "Besides, it..." he trailed off. I looked at him, trying to search for a reason behind the

insistence. He looked at me. "Promise me you won't take it off - promise you'll wear it."

"I don't know," I said quietly, weary.

"Alethea, please?" He leant towards me carefully, but my fear got the better of me. I stood up, quickly. I stepped, back against the wall and he watched me, confused. "Is everything..."

"Uh," I began. Usually, I would have cut in and said everything was fine, but I couldn't say that. He knew when I was lying, and the last thing I need was for his suspicions to get the better of him. I already knew he could be terrifying when he wanted to be. He stood up slowly and walked around the bed, keeping his eyes on mine as he came towards me.

I couldn't speak, words were completely lost. I watched him, his movements slow and cautious as he approached. My heart stuttered in my chest. I didn't know what I could say. He was the same guy who he'd been throughout all of this, even if I'd only realised certain things about him a few days before. But that was part of what worried me. It may only have been a few weeks ago, but I remembered when

he'd threaten everything just by saying my name, and when he'd refuse what I wanted simply for the sake of it. I knew he could hurt me as much as he had before.

I looked down, and my hair slid forward, over my shoulder. I was tempted to flick it back, but I could do it. I was frozen from the weight of his gaze. He moved in front of me and I felt the knot in my throat. There was a moment when nothing happened, and then his hand was under my chin, coaxing my face up. After a second, looked up to him, soothed by the shade of his eyes.

His other hand was hovering before the wall beside me. I was literally leaning back on the wall, unable to support my own weight from the surreal feeling of it all. The thuds of my heart were all but forgotten as the sped, the irregular beat becoming almost normal to me.

Unconsciously, my hand moved to tuck my hair behind my ear, but it didn't fall back to my side. Kenneth stepped closer, and my hand found his shoulder. I pulled a little away from the wall, towards

him. His eyes connected to mine for a moment. I heard my breathing loose its catch, settling into a steady rhythm.

This shouldn't be happening.

I ignore the little voice in my mind with ease, just feeling his arms as they encircled me; gently. My arms were around his shoulders too. He leant his head in towards mine.

I shouldn't be letting it.

He stopped for a second, just waiting for my reaction; giving me the option - something he hadn't done before. I noticed his eyes slip downwards; he didn't expect me to do this, or to let him do it. I waited for them to return to mine and then move slightly forwards, so that my lips were almost on his.

He made the final move. He kissed me gently, testing; asking. I didn't say no - I wasn't sure I could. His lips were moving with mine as my eyes closed. He was cold, strong, and he was all around me. The muscles of his arms encased me, pulling me closer, but not in

the controlling way I knew. It wasn't a need for my blood that led it; it was just a want for me.

I held him close too, not knowing. I didn't know whether I really wanted this, all I knew was that, right this second, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with the moment.

His lips pulled away from mine. I opened my eyes to see his.

"Wow," I breathed.

"Christ," he murmured, smiling my smile. "That certainly wasn't meant to happen."

"I know what you mean," I whispered, ignoring the knowledge that there was still something he was hiding from me. It was still hidden in his eyes; but I didn't need to remember that right now. I didn't need to remember anything; there was just me and Kenneth. The last four days hadn't happened. Things were normal. Things were fine.

"But...as long as things are going wrong..."

He pressed his lips lightly to mine once more. I smiled when he pulled back; he did to. It was hard to believe I had seen that smile before a few weeks ago.

"Why stop them?" I finished, kissing him again.

I shouldn't want it.

Chapter 8

Blood Stained Ruby Part 8

Ok, the next part - over a month after that last, but hey, deadlines clearly aren't my thing. Sorry about that.

This is my only story that isn't in the writing contest, althoguh it's the most popular. Do you think I should enter it?

Again, really sory about the wait - I hope you like this chapter

Jaelithe

A Care Past A Truth

Alethea

It was like I was a kid again. I remembered exactly how things used to feel when you would decide to stand up to somebody. You'd have the words you wanted to shout running through your mind again and again, until you actually faced them. You could spend hours thinking that you could do it, and that you would do it, but it all shattered when you finally saw them.

I could tell myself again and again that when I saw Kenneth I wouldn't get all flustered from yesterday and panicked from everything else, as well as actually being scared of what I knew was going to happen and wishing it could just be over, but anticipating seeing him all the same; but it wouldn't make a difference. When I actually saw him, my heart would sprint because it was him, and then beat even faster when I realised what a stupid reaction that was. He wanted me for one thing, and I was giving it to him, whether or not I wanted to. And I was giving him the satisfaction of wanting to see him when he wasn't at my side, no matter how many warnings my mind was giving me about it.

Sure enough, when I made my way around the final corner and saw him waiting beside my locker, my heart was racing. I tried to calm it, I knew it was wrong, but it refused to listen.

"What happened?" he asked as soon as he saw me. I hoped my expression didn't flinch the way I'd imagined at his accusation. I'd momentarily forgotten what might cause that outburst, as unrealistic as it seemed. Kenneth was the perfect distraction for this apparently.

"I don't know what you mean," I lied smoothly, pulling my geometry book out of my locker and placing my chemistry one inside it, noticing that my voice was extremely steady in comparison to my pulse. There was a pause and I glanced at him, although I wished that I hadn't when I saw, without a doubt, that he didn't believe me.

"What happened?" he asked again. I closed my locker and turned smoothly away before I answered.

"Nothing happened," I told him easily. I hoped that he didn't notice the hesitation as I began to walk away, but I was sure it was pretty obvious.

"Alethea," he said. "Tell me what happened."

"I don't know what you mean," I repeated.

This time, when he stopped I did too. I was still slightly in front of him and didn't see his expression, but his bland tone was enough to tell me he wasn't going to be fooled. I'm not exactly a bad liar, but I do have certain tells that would inform him of the alteration of the truth.

"You're limping," he stated.

I took another step, trying to smooth the movement over, but I knew I didn't succeed and decided that trying to convince him otherwise on that fact was beyond my abilities. "Yeah."

"Yeah?" he repeated. We were walking again now, and since the subject had been brought up it was hard to ignore the sting in my right leg. "Is that all you can say?"

"There's not much to say," I input. "I just tripped in PE class."

He raised an eyebrow but I turned slightly away and pretended not to notice. I knew it had been stupid to think that I could avoid this interrogation. He sighed after a moment, I whilst I wanted him to let the conversation drop, he just asked again. His voice was edging towards a warning, I could hear it.

"What happened?"

"I tripped," I replied.

"No you didn't."

I stopped and turned. My eyes only allowed a second on his before they admitted that he was right. What was he going to tell me now? It could hardly bother him if I couldn't run. I turned away briskly and started walking again.

"Alethea, tell me what happened," he said.

I sighed. I didn't want it to sound as forced to him as it did to me, but I couldn't be sure how it came across. "Kenneth, I tripped in class - I'll live."

"But that's not what happened," he decided. I still couldn't bring myself to look at him. I knew he would

just see that as a sign of distrust, but with everything that had happened in my mind, I simply wasn't sure I could stand it.

"What makes you say that?" I inquired reasonably, although the pause before the question was enough to tell him it was right; even if nothing else did.

He smirked. "You really can't lie."

"I can," I told him, and then repeated what I had told Brad before. "Only people who know me well catch me out."

"So, seeing as I know you're lying, are you going to tell me what really happened?" he asked innocently. I looked at him and gave up on lying, but I shook my head. I bit down on my lower lip to stop myself from gasping when my ankle twisted slightly.

I didn't look at him. I wasn't sure if he would be angry I wasn't going to answer him, or if he wouldn't care, or what, but I didn't want to know; until my knee buckled and he caught me as I stumbled. I straightened up and stepped away from him, keeping

my eyes on the ground and feeling the blush on my cheeks.

In the second that my eyes jumped up to his, I was touched. He didn't look annoyed or uncaring, or anything else I had imagined. He truly looked concerned. I looked down and turned away. I took a low, deep breath, hoping that it wouldn't sting as much as I thought; but of course that was wrong.

He came up beside me. Usually, he stayed a few steps back. I didn't trip again, I just needed to make sure I didn't show any signs that it hurt. I wasn't sure if I managed that or not, and didn't look to him to check. I felt the hesitation as he put his arm around me, but he didn't quite touch me, leaving the choice up to me. I took a hasty step forward, and whilst I regretted it, he got the message.

"Relax," he said reasonably, his honest sapphire eyes not leaving mine. It only took a few words for how perfect his voice sounded to envelope me again; I'd annoyed him so much that I hadn't heard this way often. I only noticed what I was missing out on now.

"I'm not going to joke about this, you honestly don't look as if you'll make it the whole way back."

"I'll phone for a lift," I shrugged, but it was hard not to lean on him as a particularly sharp sting erupted.

"No you won't," he told me. He saw the question in my eyes and answered before I could ask. "I know you won't do that. You just hate asking for things, especially when you think you can cope without it."

I just looked away.

"Alethea, honestly," he said quietly. "Don't do it. I'm not going to do anything, I just don't want you to trip again."

"I won't," I told him. My eyes jumped back to his, and I stepped back slightly, and tried to ignore the tingling sensation that spread through me when his arm was around me.

Kenneth

I looked at her. She looked back. Even if I hadn't been so used to the defence in her eyes, it would have been easy to see that she didn't what me to say what

she knew was coming; but I said it anyway, still looking for an answer.

"You did not just trip," I told her simply.

This time she didn't deny it; but we both knew it would have been impossible to do if she'd tried. She grimaced slightly when she put the ice on her ankle, and my stomach flipped. There was no physical way that something that had swollen that much was just from a trip.

"I did...technically," she muttered, staring at the empty sofa cushion beside her. How I'd gotten her home was a miracle to me. When we'd eventually got in, it was only to discover that there was no-one else here. I didn't miss the sigh of relief when she realised she didn't have to explain this to her parents just yet.

"Technically?" I inquired. When we were in, she'd dropped her bag and went straight for the kitchen. I watched her for a moment, but then I'd run her bag upstairs. I'd lingered in her room, although I couldn't tell myself why. She was in the lounge when I came back, easing the ice onto her ankle.

"Yeah," she mumbled. "Maybe 'got tripped' would be a better explanation...but it wasn't really..."

"You what?" I clarified. "Who tripped you?"

She shrugged, not meeting my gaze. She didn't reply.

"Alethea - who tripped you?" I asked, annoyed. Her eyes jumped up to mine wearily. Her hand tilted away from her ankle, moving the ice away from it. I noticed that it hadn't actually touched it for too long yet.

"It wasn't really," she began, trying to avoid it. "I mean - it was an accident, I guess, and-"

"Who?"

She dropped her gaze, falling silent. She bit her lip as she focused her gaze on the ice in her hand. She grimaced when she tried to put it on again, but pulled it away quickly. I sighed.

"Come here," I said, holding my hand out for the bundle as I went to sit beside her. She looked at me for a moment, but put the ice in my hand. I looked into her eyes as I spoke. "This isn't going to hurt -

sure it'll be a shock, but as soon as the ice numbs it, you won't feel a thing, ok?"

She nodded slightly, not looking away.

I looked down after a moment and held the ice in my hand, flexing it towards her. She flinched automatically away before it even touched her and I glanced up for a second and her eyes were still on mine. I moved my spare hand to behind her ankle, so that she couldn't shy away. I didn't quite touch it, but she knew what I meant. I looked back up to her

She gasped when the coolness shot through her, but bit her lip, hard, and didn't say anything. I could tell it was numbing when she relaxed a little. At first when her hand moved to take mine's place, I thought she was just going to move the ice away from her skin, but she kept it there. I dropped my other hand too, after a moment.

"Better?" I asked.

She smiled ruefully and I took that to be a yes.

Alethea

I wanted him to be near me. Three months ago, that idea would never have crossed my mind, and I would have considered it near treachery to think it. Two months ago I was almost stupid enough to hope that he wouldn't get to me, and that I wouldn't ever have to worry about what his presence could do. One month ago, I saw him waiting beside Miranda's locker, and I knew things would be different. One week later, and my life twisted more than I thought it could in one go. Three weeks after that and my mind was in chaos trying to stand beside the thoughts I'd had spiralling through my mind for the past year.

"Who tripped you?" he asked again. I sighed; trust Kenneth to bring the conversation back around to that. I wasn't too keen on lying, but usually there was a way to get out of answering it straight. Kenneth tended to be too persistent for that to work though.

"It doesn't matter," I told him simply. He looked at me, and I had to guess what he was thinking. He was obviously irritated that I wouldn't tell him, but it didn't truly matter who did it.

"It does," he tried to say, confident he was right.

"Why?" I inquired reasonably.

"Because," he said slowly, stretching the word out. To some people it would sound as though he was merely emphasising his point, but to me it was obvious he was choosing his words carefully, or searching for a proper reason. I'm ashamed to say that that knowledge comes more from experience than anything else.

"It doesn't," I promise him. He looked at me, almost judging if I was serious; which I was. "Why do you want to know anyway?"

I had a sneaking suspicion that I would regret asking that, if only because it was practically inviting him to get annoyed about something. He looked at me as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, something strange playing in his eyes. "You don't seriously expect me to let someone who did this on purpose get away with it?"

I didn't answer for a minute, too absorbed in what I saw.

My mind was screeching at me to ignore it, because my first interpretation of what I saw in his eyes was pure concern. I wanted to believe that I was right about that, but I knew that that went against everything I ever thought about him. He used me, literally; and that was all it was. It was probably the same sort of care you have for something you own rather than anything else.

But, my childish wants argued, it looked like more than that. Was it really that bad to believe that he could care for me? Would I be that much of a traitor to myself to think, for one afternoon, that I was more than an object to him? An outsider's view was often different to someone who was caught in the middle of things anyway - I hadn't known him at all when I thought all those things, and besides, after priding myself for not judging people (or books) by their covers, shouldn't I be able to put a few rumours behind me? Sure, those rumours had some facts entwined in them, but that didn't mean...

At moments, it was true, everything didn't seem so bad, but that was just in passing. It would all be gone in a week or two. He would be gone.

But, the arguer input again. He wasn't gone yet, was he? Everyone thought that he would go ages ago, but he hasn't. He's still here, still waiting for you every day. Given, it's not with the best of incentives, but he hasn't moved on like you're just an accessory, had he? Maybe he'll stay longer.

Maybe, I repeated in my mind. He had already stayed longer, but didn't that mean I was getting closer and closer to the leaving date? Time was stretching, and that was one way to put it. I knew the way that I would have said it any further than a week ago was that I was pushing my luck.

"Yes Kenneth, that's exactly what I expect you to do," I said, shocked, when his words eventually sank in. "What are you expecting to do?"

"Well..." he began. He trailed off into his own thoughts. I realised a second too late that I probably didn't want to know what he was planning to do,

with the shaky experiences I had with him and his anger.

"Well, you don't," I stated bluntly.

He snapped out of it. "Don't what?"

"I don't even know what you were thinking and I know you don't do that," I said. "Just because someone irritates you, doesn't mean you have the right to do anything you want to them."

"Maybe," he shrugged. "But there's a difference between irritating and actually injuring anyway. And besides, I was only thinking-"

"Kenneth!" I interrupted, my voice sharp. "Why-"

I cut off. This was Kenneth. He didn't stop to think things through, and acted on impulse rather than thought. I understood that better than most people.

He looked at me, slightly weary. "Why what?"

I shook my head, looking down and pretending to examine the ice in my hand for a moment. Don't ask again, I begged in my mind. Don't ask again. If he asked again, I was positive he wouldn't let it drop,

and seeing as he seemed to know when I was lying and when I wasn't, I would end up telling him the truth and then he would probably get mad; not something I needed right now.

"Why what?" he repeated, thrashing my hopes. I shrugged slightly, but still didn't look up to him. He put his hand under my chin and turned my face up to his. I had to remember that I'd done it first, even if Saturday seemed so long ago. "Why what? Alethea?"

"Er," I said, trying to find something in my scrambled thoughts that made sense. The intensity in his gaze was just burning, and it was hard to remember anything when he looked at me like that.

"Why what?" he asked again, entertained by my daze.

It was immensely unfair.

How was I meant to ever remember anything when he did that to me, let alone be rational? I was starting to see why so many girls fell for him so quickly. My mind buzzed. I didn't want to think about that. I wasn't going to think about him being with all of the other...

I blinked. Oh god, what was I doing? That was exactly what I should be thinking about. I should be remembering what had happened to them and making sure I didn't follow the same pattern, not ignoring it because I didn't want to think about them being with him. I wanted him with me now, and as long as I was ready for what was coming, surely it would turn out ok?

Liking the way that his lips pulled up a little wasn't wrong. Loving the way his voice sounded so close wasn't a crime. Adoring the gently sparks I felt when he touched me wasn't worth the death penalty. I mean, sure he had a few anger issues, but so did a lot of people. He didn't like me being with other people, but that could just be him being excessively protective.

I only snapped out of it when the phone rang. I would have gotten up to get it, but I looked at the ice still in my hand. This was going to be an awkward evening - and I doubted if it would be better by the morning. Even after Kenneth handed me the phone I

had to hope I was imagining the odd edge to my tone I heard. "Hello?"

"Alethea? That you love?"

I rolled my eyes. Who else would it be? "Yes, Mum, it's me."

"Is Dad there? Or Charlie?"

I knew I wasn't imagining the odd edge to her voice. I almost told her that I was the only one here, but seeing as Kenneth was within hearing distance, I decided against it. Mum was worse about Kenneth than Dad was, and that was saying something. "No, Mum. They're not here."

"Oh," was all she said. She paused for a moment before she spoke again. "Well, love, I'm going to be late home tonight, so..."

"What?" I asked, turning away from Kenneth so that I could focus on the conversation. "Why?"

"Just work," she lied.

"But-"

"I've got to go - I love you darling."

"Mum-" I began. I stopped; anything else I said would be to the dial tone. I frowned at the phone. "Helpful," I muttered.

Kenneth chuckled slightly.

I glanced back, dropping the phone onto the table. "What?"

He only shrugged. After a moment I looked away and stood up to leave; awkwardly.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

I looked back. "My bedroom, why?"

He smiled slightly, amused. I shook my head, confused, and edged my way out into the corridor, clinging to whatever came to hand. The thing about having a numb ankle was that - whilst it didn't hurt - I couldn't guarantee it would hold my weight either. I stopped a few steps away from the door when I glanced up. Ok, so that was why Kenneth was laughing.

Since when did my stairs look so...treacherous?

Kenneth

"Having trouble?" I asked, coming up behind her.

She gasped, surprised. Her hand jumped to her chest in fright, a motion I hadn't seen from anyone in a few years. It took her less than a second to realise what kind of a reaction that was and she stared laughing. Her hand was holding onto the ruby as she did so, and I was relieved to know that she was still wearing it. I couldn't honestly say I knew what I was thinking yesterday, I mean, I never...but it made her forget what she was saying at any rate.

"Just a little," she admitted, smiling. Her eyes flicked to mine for a second.

"Want a hand?"

"What are you going to do?" she asked, disbelieving.

I gave her a smug smile, but I knew I wouldn't really do what was playing in my mind. Something told me that Alethea might suspect something if I showed her I was as strong I was, or even a fraction of that.

"Give me some credit. I got you back here, didn't I?"

Somehow, we struggled up the stairs. It would have irritated me that I could have done things so much quicker if she hadn't laughed almost the whole time; that just seemed to calm things.

"Ok," I said slowly, when she was finally settled. "Why exactly did you want to come up here?"

She shrugged a little and murmured something that didn't really have a meaning to it. Her tone was defensive when she saw the way I was looking at her. "What?"

I debated for a moment before I answered.

"You shouldn't be so shy. You didn't used to be - you never failed to tell me what you thought then," I reminded her, thinking of the few times she'd really spoken out. She frowned. I heard my own words again. You didn't used to be... That made it sound as if things had been this way for years, not weeks.

"Used to be," she repeated quietly, her thoughts running the same way as mine. She wasn't looking at me. When she spoke again, I realised her thoughts

weren't quite as similar as I'd first assumed. "You wouldn't know what I used to be."

"And what do you mean by that?"

Now she looked at me. I couldn't quite see what was burning in her eyes. "I think you know exactly what I mean. Why do you think me being shy is so sudden?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "You've picked it up of late. I do know you didn't used to be like it."

She gave me an odd look at the phrase. "Really?"

"Really," I assured her.

Slowly, I brushed a few stray hairs back from her face. She shook her head back slightly, hiding a smile. I smirked when her hair fell back to where it had been before. She tried to look unbothered by the movement, but blushed anyway. That was a reaction she's been missing. Everyone else would blush so badly every time I looked at them it was all the invitation I needed. Alethea didn't. Then again, she'd already told me she didn't want anything to do with me - maybe that made the difference.

I grimaced slightly. I thought it was only a fraction, but she noticed it.

"What?" she asked, her whole expression changing. I felt my face change to a quizzical expression , querying her reaction. "What?" she asked again, slightly more defensive.

I chuckled at her reaction. "Nothing."

She looked at me with suspicious eyes. "It's not nothing. What were you thinking?"

I stifled a smile. I still couldn't help but laugh at her attitude; she got offended over the simplest things. I wasn't sure if she recognised the expression, but the way her eyes scraped me made me think not. She still wanted to know what I'd been thinking before.

She frowned again. This time the laughter bubbled from my throat before I could stop it. It was only soft, but she glowered, not seeing the funny side to the situation. I wasn't entirely sure myself why it made me laugh. She started grumbling something that I knew I wasn't meant to here. It wasn't exactly my fault that my hearing was a little better than she

expected. She didn't usually do that. It was moment like this that really did make me laugh, a reaction I thought I'd lost a long time ago.

"And never tells me anything..." she finished.

"You don't tell me anything either," I pointed out innocently.

She wanted to look away; I could tell, but she kept her eyes on mine. I wasn't meant to hear that, so my reply shocked her a little, and the words themselves made her uncomfortable. She edited my words slightly. "I don't tell you anything you don't need to know."

"Well then, you don't think I need to do an awful lot," I said, my tone serious now.

"And you think you do," she understood slowly.

I shrugged a little.

"Tell me what you were thinking," she said. The words sounded a little like a question, but I could tell that she didn't mean them to be.

"Ok then," I allowed lightly. I didn't have any plans to confess where my thoughts had really been heading, but I knew I could work this my way. She looked appeased for a moment before becoming doubtful. "But only if you tell me what you thinking about downstairs - whatever it was you wouldn't ask me."

She tensed. "I don't like that idea," she said stiffly.

I raised an eyebrow. "I do."

"I don't," she stated stubbornly. She started to turn away and push herself up, but stopped after a moment when her eyes flicked to her ankle. So instead, she just sat there, arms folded, looking decisive.

If there was one thing that I had understood about the way she acted, it was this. There was one thing that she was just as good at as the others.

"Alethea?" I said slowly.

She glanced back at me. Or rather, it was meant to be a glance.

Alethea

His eyes caught mine again.

Everything that I was trying to forget was there, and it wasn't helping my resolve in the slightest. The innocence that seemed to glimmer from his eyes was something I knew I'd never forget, and - childishly - hoped I'd never be without.

Eventually, I gave in. One day I would find a way to resist his eyes, but until then I knew he'd win the battle. I hoped that one day was soon, I could really do with it.

"Why is your first reaction to something you don't like violence?" I risked, sure I would regret the words. I heard them rush, frantic to be out in the air, but couldn't work out what made them do it. I looked at him, and something new stirred in his expression. "You can't do that. You won't solve everything by hurting."

Although I didn't look away from his face, I saw his hand twitch, just fractionally, edging towards a fist. I felt my body want to flinch away, but I didn't move; he stopped the motion before his fingers could even curl. Kenneth hated being told he was wrong, I knew

that before I'd even set eyes on him. I knew a lot of things before I'd even set eyes on him; or rather, I thought I had.

He looked away for a moment, but when he turned back, his expression was clear, as though nothing had changed.

"Ok, so now that we're past that, are you going to tell me why you came up here?" he asked simply.

I raised an eyebrow, but it was a knee-jerk reaction. I couldn't help but be sceptical when he did that to me, but there didn't seem to be anything wrong with the words. Well, there wouldn't have been if I hadn't remembered that I'd given my side of the deal, and he was yet to reveal his.

"Oh no," I told him. "You aren't getting out of it that easily."

"Out of what?" he asked innocently. I was dazed for a moment; I'd never noticed what a good actor he could be. The question glittering in his eyes mirror his expression exactly, and the confused tone was also echoed in his voice.

"What were you thinking about?" I asked.

He shrugged a little and looked away, although more from self consciousness than anything else. "I was thinking about something Amos mentioned, nothing really."

The edge to his voice made it sound as though, whatever it was, he really didn't want to say it. I wasn't entirely convinced with the explanation he'd given me, but I didn't push it too far.

"Let's...go back downstairs," I said after a moment, snapping him out of wherever his thoughts had led him. After a moment, his eyes refocused on my expression and he smiled my smile again, standing and offering me his hand.

"Sure."

Kenneth

Disregarding the sounds that started to invade my mind, I looked at her again. She didn't mind. Or she didn't notice. Most of her attention was focused on the remained of the staircase before her, so I

assumed it was the second reason, not that it mattered.

Did she really think that?

Her face when she'd asked me upstairs had been flushed and hassled, but there still didn't seem to be any doubt in her words. She really didn't think it was right. Sure, she was worried and stuttered the words, but that didn't diminish their meaning.

She sighed, and I really hated her for it. She was unhappy because what she had to deal with now was an inconvenience, nothing more. Watching the way her features twisted when she started to step away, I felt the rage I was used to as it burned me on the inside. The reason wasn't. I'd never had this before. I'd felt this way because of other people plenty of times - but never for other people, or one other person.

And I didn't even know who'd done it.

Was use was that? It didn't matter what she thought, although by now I was sure she meant what she'd told me, there was no way I was going to stand by

while she suffered for someone else. I could easily find out what had happened, I just liked to believe that she'd trust me enough to tell me. Then again, trust had never gotten me anywhere before.

She tried to step away from me. I wanted her to wait until she was downstairs before she tried this, but it didn't look as if her patience would last that long. Biting my tongue, I let her try - but I knew what her reaction would be when she tried to walk on that ankle. I was almost positive it was broken, not that she'd ever admit to that.

As expected, her expression crumpled the second her foot touched the ground.

She blinked a few more times as she tried to channel it, but still fell. I caught her before she could go too far, but she didn't meet my eyes. Her gaze was focused downward, as if she was concentrating on something; I realised that my movement may have been a little too quick.

"Thanks," she murmured eventually.

"No problem," I replied simply, trying to look away from the water forming in her eyes. Subtly, I twisted one of my hands into a fist, making sure she didn't see, and clenched it tight. "And who do you have to thank for the problem in the first place?"

She shot me a look, almost glaring. I didn't expect her to fall for it or open up, but it was worth a chance. There were plenty of things I hadn't bothered to get her to tell me, but this was the first time I'd really needed to know something that she wouldn't say. One name - that was all I wanted.

"Why won't you tell me?" I asked through my teeth as she edged her way down the stairs, leaning heavily on me for support. The strange thing was, I was irritated that she wouldn't answer or give me a proper reason for the silence, but what really made my blood boil - theoretically - was that I couldn't do anything about the expression on her face, and that that expression was only there because of something that someone else had done.

I heard her low gasp, and realised that maybe I should have paid more attention to what I'd heard

before. Her eyes flew towards the door, her expression a mixture of worry and shock.

What idiot designed this house so that the base of the stairs was facing the front door?

Alethea

I felt my body freeze as I watched the door. My mind's signal just stopped, so my muscles didn't know what to do and followed the example. Part of my mind was probably aware that Kenneth was taking most of my weight, but I couldn't find the will to stop it.

"Kenneth, go," I hissed, not moving my eyes. He didn't move. Was he frozen like me? I knew he could go - I remembered him doing it before. Sure, the incentive had been different, he'd wanted to get to me rather than away from someone else, but surely that shouldn't limit his speed. He could be gone in a second, I was sure, but he stayed.

I gulped as the door opened, moving at an antagonising slow pace.

"Go, Kenneth," I whispered again, turning quickly to him.

He was closer than I'd expected, meaning his lips brushed mine. He looked me straight in the eyes. "I'm not going anywhere," he breathed.

Well, at least I knew it was him being stubborn and shocked into immobility. The revelation wasn't much of a comfort.

"Do you trust me?" he whispered in my ear, looking past me to the door.

My answer didn't take any consideration. "Yes."

I watched a slight smile play on his lips at the immediate response. His breath was warm against my skin when he spoke again, unusually calming, despite everything else. "Close your eyes."

Harry

I chuckled to myself as I backed into the door, edging it open slowly so that I didn't jog Charlie. He knew he was getting too old for this, but when he was sleeping so peacefully in the car after almost a week of

sleepless nights, having me carry him up to his room didn't seem like that bad of a punishment. It was only when my eyes fell on the lounge as I let the door swing closed behind me that my expression faltered.

"Alethea," I said slowly, under my breath. Her eyes flew to mine, as though she didn't realise I'd be here, but then flicked around her, before resting suspiciously on him for a moment. On Kenneth. Then they leapt back to me. I was shaking my head, my thoughts scrambled.

She looked almost terrified. Alethea stood, slightly awkwardly. "Dad - maybe I should-"

"No," I stated bluntly as she started to reach for Charlie, despite being too far away to even touch him. Letting my eyes scrape to Kenneth, I couldn't truly say what was surging through me as I saw the way he was watching her. Fixing her with an accusing glare, I started to say something else, unsure of precisely what was about to leave my mouth.

"Dad," she started, stepping forwards, apparently without thinking. I felt the expression on my face

change immediately when I saw hers, and watched her balance shatter within a second. Of course I was angry, but I now had a protectiveness I thought I'd lost raging inside me. Watching him catch hold of her, I felt the shouts start to rise inside me. It was only the look on her face that stopped me.

Glancing down at the boy in my arms, I turned away. If he wasn't out of the house before I came back...

Alethea

"Oh god, he'll kill me," I breathed. "He'll kill me, he'll kill me..."

Kenneth chuckled slightly, although it was a stiffer than his normal, careless laugh. "I think that's an overstatement."

I shook my head, my voice coming out as little more than a mutter. "No it's not."

He scoffed, completely calm again. "Yes it is."

I carried on shaking my head, no space left in my mind to wonder precisely what had happened in those few seconds where I closed my eyes. I was on

the stairs when he whispered to me, and then I was in the lounge, watching Dad walk in with Charlie...

I realised something that should have been obvious, but had taken a long time to sink in. My eyes snapped to Kenneth's. "You have to go."

"I what?" he asked, for the first time looking unsure of himself.

I hated saying it, but it was true. "You've got to go - imagine what he'll do if-"

"I don't think your dad's anything to worry about," he told me simply. "I doubt he'll do anything. Except possibly turn an interesting shade to the face, but-"

"This isn't the time to be making jokes!" I snapped.

He looked at me with an odd expression on his face. "You really want me to go?"

I didn't know how to answer that, but he still seemed to understand my silence. He still had his arm around me to help me stay upright, but he slowly move it away a foreign look in his eyes. He slipped his hand into mine as I lowered myself back down to

the sofa, unsure of my feet. He crouched down in front of me, holding my gaze.

"I'll come back," he promised me.

"You can't - not tonight," I whispered hurriedly.

He kissed me once, gently brushing his lips against mine. I fell silent again, my eyes rising slowly to his, but he just stepped away, squeezing my hand lightly. As I heard Dad's heavy footsteps against the first few stairs, Kenneth flashed me a smile before slipping out of my sight.

Kenneth

"You deliberately disobeyed me!"

Even I grimaced when I heard the sharpness to Harry's tone. Alethea certainly wouldn't like that. Feeling my hands clench to fists, I slowed the shakes that tried to seize them.

Of course, I could have gone. But I didn't think there was a way that I could have gotten out with Harry seeing, and without Alethea getting even slightly suspicious. She was getting very perceptive. If I'd just

disappeared from behind her, I hated to think what would start running through her mind. Normally, that wouldn't be a problem, but I also doubted that leaving Alethea unconscious was in anyone's best interests.

So instead, I'd done one of the most idiotic things that I could possibly do, and literally lifted her, sprinting for about half a second from halfway up the staircase to a seat in the lounge, and acted as if everything was normal. Damien was going to kill me if he ever found out, and my use of the phrase wasn't an overstatement.

"I didn't - I mean, I wasn't-" Alethea stammered. How she thought she could lie I might never understand.

"I explicitly told you that I didn't want him here - and he was! How is that not disobeying me?" he asked her furiously.

I could almost imagine what was happening inside.

"It was," she confessed quickly, trying to finished her sentence before Harry cut across her again. "But I didn't mean to - he just helped me back and-"

He sighed furiously and Alethea fell silent. I knew she be biting her lip then, she always did under pressure, whether or not she realised. Eventually she spoke, her voice little more than a whisper.

"I didn't mean to. You weren't home, and I couldn't...he wouldn't have let me...I mean, I wasn't going to make it home on my own," she admitted.

I heard Harry's heavy sigh, and then his gruff voice sounded again, although much softer. "Come here - let's take a look at that ankle."

"I tripped," I heard Alethea repeat again, this time for the benefit of her mother. Well, at least I knew it wasn't only me she was keeping this from.

"Well, alright," Susan said dubiously, obviously more suspicious that Harry had been. He'd swallowed what Alethea had said hook, line and sinker, although after having to repeat it so many times, I had to admit she was getting closer to sounding honest when she said it.

After hearing the soft sounds of Susan's departure, I leapt down, landing softly on the grass. My head

snapped up at the sound of a fierce hiss, but my eyes were on met by a pair of milky eyes glaring back at me. I hissed a little in response, but Diana just darted through the back door.

"Oh, hey Di," I heard Alethea breath, laughing a little.

I pushed the door open a little and leant against the frame to see her facing away from me. "What? So the cat gets a greeting and I don't even get a 'hi'?"

"Kenneth!" she gasped, spinning around and almost overbalancing. She caught herself as the last moment. Glancing towards the door to the lounge, she lowered her voice before speaking again, although the speed only picked up. "What are you doing here?"

"Hey," I said, shrugging a little. "I told you I'd come back."

"Alethea?" Susan asked, heading back towards us. I frowned at the door for a moment, although when I looked back to her, Alethea's expression was close to panic. Her eyes met mine for a moment and she

gestured - slightly frantically - towards the table, and I knew what she was implying.

I raised an eyebrow. "You are joking?"

Her expression told me she wasn't. I rolled my eyes, not seeing the panic of the situation, and ducked behind it, if only to humour her.

"Alethea, love, what are you doing?" Susan asked, poking her head in the door. I frowned a covered my nose with my hand. The stench of cigarette smoke was immediately evident in the air - to me at least. Apparently, Alethea hadn't noticed. Either that, or she was used to it.

"Nothing, Mum," she said quickly. "Just talking to Diana."

"Diana," I scoffed, knowing that Alethea could hear me but Susan couldn't. In the pause that followed, I could imagine Alethea's slightly frantic expression, as well as the way her mother's thoughtful eyes would process it.

"Ok, hon, I've just got to pop out for a while," Susan explained softly. Diana hissed a little, and whilst I

was curious about the action, I knew I would never admit to it.

"Ok," Alethea said, a little disappointment edging its way into her tone. A moment later, I heard the door snap shut. Standing up, I saw her looking away from me, after her mother.

"Well," I began. "Now that that's out of the way-"

"Shh!" she cut across me, holding up a hand for silence. That was new.

I heard her father start to descend the stairs; that was obviously the reason for her hesitation. Her brother started making some kind of noise upstairs, and we both stayed still as the footsteps on the stair halted for a moment before retreating back up them. She breathed a sigh of relief, smiling for the briefest moment.

"Right, you have to go," she told me quickly, when she was sure her father was suitably distracted.

"That's a tad harsh. I have only just got here, after all," I reminded her, smiling a little. She raised an

eyebrow. I lifted two hands, signalling a slight surrender. "But alright, I'll leave - on one condition."

Her eyes narrowed a little, although I thought she was joking. "I don't like your conditions."

I shrugged a little, relaxing against the wall. "Well, that's fine with me..."

"What is it?" she asked, slightly weary.

My expression became serious. "Tell me who tripped you."

"No Kenneth," she said bluntly, ushering me out of the door - or attempting to; I didn't move.

"Yes," I said simply. She frowned at me. "Who was it?"

She rolled her eyes. "If I tell you I'm a total idiot and fell over my own feet, will you leave?"

"No."

"Fine then," she said moodily, folding her arms.

"Come on," I said softly, looking her in the eyes. Gently, I caught hold of her wrists and pulled them away from their position across her chest. I stepped

towards her, barely breathing the words I uttered next. "I only want to know who did it..."

I felt her shiver and I smiled to myself.

"I only needed a name," I continued in an undertone. "No-one'll know you told me anyway. Just to make me feel better."

Her voice was barely a whisper, but I could still hear the doubt in it. "I can't, Kenneth, I..."

"Don't you trust me?" I asked.

"I do," she told me quietly, relaxing at little.

I wrapped my arms reassuringly around her. "So what's the problem?"

She didn't answer. I fought the smile that wanted to fall onto my lips, knowing that I was winning this. I didn't say anything else for a moment, letting her think. Unconsciously, she moved her hands too, bringing them up to my chest.

Gently, I brushed her hair back from her face, but fingers stroking across her neck in the process. She tensed, although I couldn't understand why. When I

spoke again, I kept my voice the same, showing her that nothing had changed. She wouldn't ever understand how close to irresistible the pounding blood in her veins was to me.

"Who was it?"

She looked up at me, but I wasn't sure what was playing in her eyes. Without thinking about it, I pressed my lips to hers. When I went to pull back for a moment, she moved too, not letting me escape. I almost smiled, but instead I just kissed her back.

My mind totally shut down after a moment. At first, I still wanted to know what she wasn't telling me, but even that thought left me soon. It was just us.

I didn't realise how firmly I was pulling her to me - not one part of my mind bothered to remind me to be cautious.

"Kenneth?" she asked, whispering, as she pulled back a little.

"Yeah?" I replied quietly, half-convinced I was about to get the answer I wanted.

"I'm winning this round," she told me quietly, smiling smugly as she pushed lightly against my chest. I was a little confused for a moment, but I realised what she was thinking when I stumbled back a step and found the evening air surrounding me.

I raised an eyebrow, guessing I'd been a little to...distracted to notice where she was leading me. "Impressive," I allowed.

"Goodnight, Kenneth," she said, going to close the door.

I stopped it by catching it without my hand. I heard the slight plea in my voice, although I was sure it wasn't audible to her. "That's not how you say goodnight."

As the light confusion flicked across her expression, I showed her what I meant by cupping her face in my hands and leaning in again.

I couldn't help it. As abnormal as some people may find me, there were some things I still hadn't quite overcome. Especially as this was all new to me.

"Will you tell me who it was now?" I asked when I pulled away, trying to make the question sound casual. I turned my features to a soft expression, void of all forms that might betray my intentions and keeping my appearance to a mild curiosity.

Her eyes were slightly distant for a moment, but the smile on her lips when they refocused was almost stunning.

"Not a chance," she grinned, closing the door before I could say anything else.

I blinked and stared at the barrier for a moment. "Huh."

Lucy

I thought that maybe I'd be able to get something out of him today, even if it was only a few words, but I hadn't. I got zilch. Nadda. Nothing. Not even a smidgen of anything.

Who did Brad think he was to keep things from me anyway? He knew as well as I did that if I asked anyone else, I was sure to get an answer - and I knew Mark would tell me as soon as I even hinted at it...

I gasped a little when I slammed my locker shut, shocked to see Kenneth stood there. I could have sworn he wasn't there a second before. He was looking at me seriously, his eyebrows pulled together with a slightly curious expression on his face. Mainly though, his expression was fierce. It was almost intimidating.

"You were with Alethea last period yesterday, right?" he asked instantly, his voice low but serious.

I was slightly startled by the question, and a little overwhelmed at his closeness. I realised I hadn't really spoken to him before. "PE? Yeah..."

His jaw flexed a little, tense. "When she left, she was..."

"Limping?" I suggested. He agreed with a very small nod of his head. "I know."

He raised an eyebrow, suddenly looking venomous. I knew a natural reaction would be to flinch away from that look, but I the reaction seemed lost on me. "So you know why?"

"Sure, I guess," I shrugged. It was hardly science. "I mean a fall like that was hardly going to leave her feeling fine."

"Fall? When? Why?" he queried.

"Er," I stalled, weary of where his interest came from. "Towards the end of the lesson, you know."

"Uh-huh," he said curtly, digesting the information.

After a short moment, I realised he was waiting for more. "Well, it was volleyball and all, and - well - you know Miranda, she's a total klutz."

"Miranda?" he asked harshly. "What does she have to do with it?"

I shrugged a little. "She crashed straight into her - into Alethea, I mean."

His whole expression glossed over, his voice was harsh and blunt when he spoke. "Right. Thanks."

He turned abruptly away before I could say anything else and marched down the corridor, turning around the closest corner. It took me a moment after he left to realise that everyone was staring at me, and

another minute or so to combat the stares. As soon as I looked at them, my audience looked away. I started to walk away, shaking my head. Strange place.

My mind was too busy inventing a few theories that could make sense around this whole thing to watch where I was going, and it wasn't long before I crashed into someone. I apologised instantly, but a familiar voice informed me it wasn't a problem. I didn't know whether to be glad to hear him or not. He steadied me.

"What did he want?" Brad asked, before I could even get a greeting in. He didn't look happy at all, but why would he be? I didn't know what was annoying him, but as he connected his furious eyes to mine, I didn't have a doubt in my mind as to who he was referring.

I answered his question with one of my own, not seeing why I should tell him everything when he wouldn't tell me anything. "Are you going to tell me what you've been hiding for the past few days?"

"No," he answered immediately, not giving it a second thought.

I looked at him for a minute, but he was deadly serious. Without another word, I turned away. He caught my hand before I could get far.

"Aw, Luce, don't be like that," he pleaded.

"Like what?" I asked simply, not looking at him.

He was quiet for a moment. "Don't you think you're overreacting?"

I pulled me had out of his and left, not bothering to glance back over my shoulder, all the while trying to forget how much I'd wanted my hand in his only two days before.

Alethea

"You know what Miranda?" Brad said harshly. "Just stop it. This isn't anyone's fault - and you're not doing it any good."

"I don't know what you mean," she said simply, widening her eyes in supposed innocence. I was really getting tired of this - I felt retched enough as it was without Miranda stepping in to everything. I remembered exactly what I'd done to her without

her constantly reminding me. Normally, I would've just walked away, but as I refused to see a doctor last night and wouldn't miss school just because of my ankle, I was practically clinging to Brad, and couldn't at the moment.

"Brad, drop it," I whispered, trying to urge him to turn around.

Miranda's expression only became worse. "Yes, Brad, you can't keep pushing anything now, can you? You've had the almighty Alethea tell you otherwise."

She didn't see my expression because I was facing away from her, but Brad did, and he was less than pleased. She kept talking. I wasn't even sure of exactly what she was saying, but eventually her voice became too much for me and I snapped.

"Do you want to know what he told me?" I finally asked furiously, whipping around.

"I couldn't care less what you two shared. I'd rather you kept it to yourself if I'm honest," she said reasonably, although I heard the fire in her tone as

she continued. "Obviously, it isn't anything I'm good enough to hear."

"That first morning - when you were there, and Brad, and everyone else?" I said, knowing she'd want to hear it. She hesitated a moment. I felt Brad tense beside me as well.

Her eyes narrowed. "You're bluffing. You wouldn't really say that."

"Try me," I retorted.

For a moment, I thought she might back down. I could have sworn that I saw the eyes of my friend echoed in the ones of this stranger as she realised how much I didn't want to have to do this - not now, not ever. It may have been less than a second, but I was sure I'd seen it. Until that look vanished.

Miranda was never one to back down either. I'd practically dared her to ask for it, so of course she did, gesturing to everyone watching as she did do. "Go on, then, tell us. I'm sure we'd all love to know what he told you so secretly in that little episode three weeks ago."

I kept my eyes on hers, and forgot about everyone else. In a few hours my words would be circulating anyway - no matter how many people really heard the announcement. Our school was really one for rumours.

"We're all waiting," she reminded me after a moment when I still hadn't spoken.

"Come on, A," Brad told me quietly, rubbing my shoulder reassuringly. I watched the way Miranda's eyes followed the motion with a loathing taste. "She's not worth it. She-"

"Stay out of this, Brad," I snapped. He stopped, and I saw Miranda raise an eyebrow. Smirking, she turned away from my silence. I breathed out heavily before I spoke, wishing more than anything that I didn't have to do this. "He promised me I wasn't any different - that I was exactly the same as everyone else. That it was just luck."

She looked back to me, her voice harsh when she spoke, but burning with curiosity. "What exactly did he say?"

"He said," I breathed, looking down. "'Just the same as anyone else, you have to learn to live with things when they change.'"

"Is that all he said?" she asked when I stopped, closing my eyes.

I shook my head slowly, feeling the tears on my lashes. I didn't want to cry. But then again, I was getting everything I didn't want recently.

Brad rubbed my back gently. His tone was hard when he spoke to Miranda. "There? Are you happy now?"

I interrupted him, continuing with the words I'd committed to memory. "'This could be the beginning of eternity. Once that arrives, you can't escape it - just the same as anyone else."

I couldn't say I understood every word of what he said, but I got the essence of it. I was the same as anyone else he'd ever seen. I couldn't tell what was on her expression from this distance, but I felt the fresh slash through me as she turned and stormed away. It hurt to remember that this was someone

who, less than two months ago, would never have turned her back on me.

"Is that really what he said?" he asked.

I looked up to him, forgetting for a moment, everyone else who could hear my words. "Yeah. That's exactly what he said."

"I'm alright for a while," I told him. "Lucy's meeting me at my locker."

"Right," he acknowledged. Without another word, he helped me over, before whipping his phone out as he turned away. I glanced at my watch. She'd be here in a minute. It felt good to know that there was someone who I could talk to that didn't know about all of this. I wasn't sure of precisely how much she did know, but having something that wasn't beside me just for the latest piece of gossip was relieving to say the least. Brad was a friend too, but it was different. Every time he looked at me I could see the pity in his eyes, and the worry, and the concern...and then I realised what I'd cost him.

Trying to ignore all of the whispers I could hear almost pulsing around me, I opened my locker. Maybe my sanity was buried somewhere inside it. My eyes flicked up and down the corridor when a folded piece of paper fell from my door and I bent down slowly to pick it up.

When I opened it, I was shocked to see the same graceful handwriting I'd seen across the envelope congratulating my parents on the weekend away printed on the page.

I've got something to do - I'll be back later tonight.

K

xox

Something to do. It didn't sound like a big deal - and he clearly trusted me enough to believe this - at least, I hoped it was trust. It all seemed rather typical if I was honest; here I was, almost in tears, while he could go off to somewhere completely normal without a care in the world.

If he could turn his back, I wanted to believe that I could to, but as I clutched the note to my chest, I knew it wasn't quite that simple.

Kenneth

"Is everything ok?"

I found the words were out of my mouth before I'd really thought of them. Something was off about her expression, but I couldn't quite place it. I knew I'd timed this right - so that there was no-one else in the house, so I couldn't think of what was wrong. I knew that what I was really afraid of was letting her sink back into the same state she'd been in yesterday. All of that over a friend? I wondered if she knew I didn't believe that that was all that had been bothering her.

Alethea smiled a little, noticeably soothed. "Yeah - fine."

Something was different about her voice too, but I decided not to push it. She stepped out of the way as I walked into the house, keeping her eyes on my expression. I didn't quite know what to make of it. She smiled as she limped her way back to the lounge,

sinking into the closest armchair and grabbing the ice from beside it. At least she could kind of walk on it - that was good. The flair in her eyes when she glanced up at me was worrying.

"What happened?" I asked her slowly.

She looked up to me, but something was hidden in her expression. "What do you mean?"

"I mean...what happened?" I repeated, unable to find another way to phrase it. "I wasn't there today - did I miss anything?"

She pretended to think about it for a moment, but her face looked a little to stressed for me. "Nope - don't think so. So where have you been the past few hours?"

"I quite liked what we did yesterday," I told her. "It seems fair - you say something, I say something."

"Fair? That's not like you," she commented, still smiling in that too-frantic way. "Does this mean I get to find out what Amos said that upset you yesterday?"

Somehow, the energetic coating across her eyes pulled the response from me before I'd really thought about it.

Alethea

"Not exactly. I was actually remembering something about last Monday," he admitted. "And I guess it stung a little more than I expected."

"But you told me-"

He shrugged it off before I could even get the complaint out.

I'd never noticed what a good actor he could be.

I blew the comment off by standing hurriedly and heading through to the kitchen. I knew that any other day I would have been irritated by that - by him lying to me - but right now, I was so relieved to actually see him that it didn't matter. Even if I couldn't forget everything Miranda had said, having him nearby made things easier. It should have the opposite effect, but I didn't want to delve too deeply into the logic of it. Being near him helped - I left it at that.

As I turned on the tap to fill my glass, I heard his voice from behind me. "So what happened today then? Since I gave you an answer?"

The tone in his voice was more than curious - it was worried. Obviously, I'd let something slip by turning away. He knew I'd be angry, and noticed that I wasn't. I couldn't tell what he made of the change, but answered him as briefly as possible. "Nothing much. Brad and Lucy aren't talking, so thing's were kind of awkward."

I turned back to him after switching the tap off. He gave me a strange look. "Is that all?"

I shrugged. "That's all that's new. School is school - nothing interesting there really."

My voice was getting higher in pitch with every note, and he heard it. "Are you sure though? Nothing else?"

To avoid answering, I lifted the glass to my lips and drank. And drank. And drank. I almost laughed at his expression when I lowered the glass - as a distraction, it worked rather well.

"Hey, I can't help it - I was dying of thirst," I explained simply, shrugging as I turned away to rinse the glass out. That was something I could manage without hesitation. I didn't know what he saw in my movements, but I was clearly giving something away.

"I know what you mean," he replied quietly. I didn't quite register his words for a moment, but when I did, my hands froze where they were and my eyes leapt over to his.

He looked at me quizzically, confused by my pause. Aside from that, his eyes were clear. I didn't see the glint that I feared. Come to think of it, that was rather strange; there wasn't even a faint glimmer there, but I was sure there should be.

"Where did you go earlier?" I asked slowly, suspicious.

"Nowhere important," he shrugged.

Still shaken from my confession from earlier, I decided to let it go.

Lucy

I started fiddling with my iPod, realising that conversation was a lost cause at the moment. Brad was off with Mark and everyone - not that I would be talking to him anyway - and Alethea was staring into space. Eventually, she glanced at me.

"Headphone?" I offered.

"I've never really been one for music," she replied.

"Go on," I encouraged. "I don't have anything suicidal on here, I promise."

She smiled and took it. Something had already been playing, so we only caught the end of the song. I really should remember to lock it when I put it in my pocket; it would probably explain why the battery always seemed to be low when I wanted to use it.

There's no point trying to hide it

No point trying to evade it

I know I got a problem

Problem with misbehaviour

If you fall for me

I'm not easy to please

I'm gonna tear you apart

Told you from the start, baby from the start

I'm only gonna break, break your, break, break your heart.

I'm only gonna break, break your, break, break your heart.

I'm only gonna break, break your, break, break your heart.

I'm only gonna break, break your, break, break your heart.

I almost groaned. I hated that song so much. Still, the music faded out after a moment. I started searching for something else to play; preferably something that I'd put on here willingly.

"Well, that was..." Alethea started, looking a little distant.

"Did you like it?" I asked quickly. "I hate that song. My brother practically forced me to put it on - I guess he hopes it'll deter me from getting a boyfriend any time

soon." Somehow, my eyes found Brad on the other side for the field as I spoke.

"Brother?" she inquired.

I shrugged, sifting through some other songs. "Well, step brother. Soon-to-be. But Sam's cool - he's definitely better than his dad. Sam actually knows my name, and is able to hold a conversation."

It was true. As soon as Mum actually got married, me and Sam would be seeing a lot more of each other. It still hurt that I only knew him because of what Mum had done; but he wasn't that bad. He teased me like any brother would, but gave me enough space as a friend as well.

"Here," I said triumphantly. "This is the sort of thing I listen to. Taylor Swift."

I took a chance

I took a shot

And you might think I'm bulletproof

But I'm not

You took a swing

I took it hard

And down here from the ground

I see

Ohh - ah

I'm sick and tired of your attitude

I'm feeling like I don't know you

You tell me that you love me

Then cut me down

And I need you like a heart beat

But you know you got a mean streak

It makes me run for cover when you're around

And here's to you and your temper

Yes, I remember what you said last night

And I know that you see

What you're doing to me

Tell me why

Well you could write a book on

How to ruin someone's perfect day

Well I get so confused and frustrated

Forget what I'm trying to say

Ooh - oh

I'm sick and tired of your reasons

I got no-one to believe in

You tell me that you want me

Then push me around

Alethea

I had assumed that this song would be better than the last; I'd heard of the artist at least. It wasn't exactly that I didn't like music, I just didn't put in the effort to listen to the latest songs; I'd always relied on Miranda to tell me what was happening in the music world - and she always had, before.

So far, this song had been anything but reassuring.

And I need you like a heart beat

But you know you got a mean streak

It makes me run for cover when you're around

And here's to you and your temper

Yes, I remember what you said last night

And I know that you see

What you're doing to me

Tell me why

Why do you have to make me feel small

So you can feel whole inside

Why do you have to put down my dreams

'Til you're the only thing on my mind

Well I'm sick and tired of your attitude

I'm feeling like I don't know you

You tell me that you want me

Then cut me down

I'm sick and tired of your reasons

I got no-one to believe in

You ask me for my love

Then push me around

And here's to you and your temper

Yes, I remember what you said last night

And I know that you see

What you're doing to me

Tell me why

Why

Tell me why

I take a step back

And let you go

I told you I'm not bulletproof

Now you know

Just before the music could start to fade, the school bell rang, causing me to jump. I know had a fresh reason in my mind to avoid music in the future. Brad ran over, grinning. He didn't notice the way that Lucy stopped what she was doing when he reached us.

"Hey," he said, although I noticed it was more to Lucy than me. His tone sounded almost cautious, which was something that was new to me. My eyes flicked quickly to her. Hers were slightly cold when she looked at Brad, so I had the feeling I was missing something.

Giving up for a moment, he held out a hand to me to help me up.

"I can stand up," I frowned. He smiled and stepped back, holding his hands up in surrender. I thought about it for a half a moment, and realised I wasn't as sure about that statement as I wanted to be.

"Having trouble?" asked a voice behind me.

Lucy

There was that look again. Brad was absolutely glaring at Kenneth, not that he cared in the slightest. Alethea smiled as Kenneth reached out a hand for her, and - although I didn't think it was possible - Brad's glare deepened. He looked positively sick as she took his hand and he pulled her to her feet.

I knew I was pushing my luck to try and hold a grudge for over two days - it went against my nature - but if it was something that bothered him that much I wanted to think he would tell me what it was. Plus, I could tell Brad was running out of excuses. He didn't have a proper reason not to tell me what was going on, so I just had to wear him down. Or I could ask Mark...but I knew I'd rather know that Brad would tell me...

Brad

I hated him. I really hated him. Just watching the smile on Alethea's face was enough to amplify that hate. I hated him so much it was almost painful, and although every time I saw him I didn't think it could get any worse, it always did. Maybe it was seeing that Alethea really was starting to follow the same road as every other girl he'd ever messed with, but something inside me was agonizingly close to snapping right then.

Balling my hands up into fist at my sides, I just had to let the anger wash over me. It hadn't escaped my notice that if it wasn't for him, there wouldn't have

been a need for that scene yesterday with Miranda. I hoped I was imagining the physical shakes of rage that shuddered through me, although I couldn't be sure.

Alethea

I blushed when my eyes eventually edged their way towards Brad. After everything we'd ever talked about, and I was here, totally betraying it. Before my eyes could quite reach his, he grabbed his bag from the ground and turned away, marching off. Lucy's eyes when I glanced at her were confused and hurt, but she dashed after him, presumably to make amends. I looked back to Kenneth to see him studying my expression.

"It doesn't matter," he told me. "If they want to act that way - it's up to them."

"I guess," I allowed, still not able to be bothered by anything with him so close. Miranda wasn't here today, so I didn't even have to worry about that.

"I suppose we'd better get you to class," he told me.

"I suppose," I agreed, reluctant. That meant another hour away from him when all of the thoughts could get into my head.

"Where are you heading?" he asked. "History?"

"Yeah," I sighed. I really wasn't in the mood for Hippocrates right now. Sure, he was mighty and powerful then, but who really cared now? I'd much rather be somewhere with Kenneth. And somewhere completely away from school at that. He laughed at my expression and I found myself smiling to.

I really never had noticed what a good actor he could be, but it occurred to me as he helped me struggle to class, that he had to be. I'd never seen him eat anything, and I was sure that was something most people wouldn't be able to get away with - he must have had to fabricate a few good excuses at least on the subject. That meant he was a good actor, otherwise I was sure there would be other rumours floating around school about him.

And there was the way he looked at me. When he looked at me, I didn't see him looking at something he owned, or needed, or possessed, he just looked at

me like anyone else. Even that must have been a struggle for him considering why he was with me. Or with anyone. I guessed. But I couldn't say I knew anything about it, I mean, maybe the way he looked at me was the way he thought of me.

Anything was possible, right?

Kenneth

I remembered the first time I'd tasted her blood. Even then it had tasted different; wonderful. After yesterday's venture, I knew it wasn't my 'time' as my brother had tried to convince me; but that it really was just her. The taste of it on my tongue now was even better than ever, but I knew that I could manage it now. I knew I'd pull away in time.

Lowering her back to the bed, I felt the last few drops dissolve on my tongue.

Alethea

I was getting used to this. Waking up in the middle of the afternoon was almost second nature now.

I almost opened my eyes - it was a reflex reaction after all. But something stopped me. Something that I understood after a moment when I felt Kenneth's fingers brush over my hair. It wasn't across my face or anything like that, he just did it for the sake of it. I kept my eyes closed, knowing that the second they so much as flickered, he'd pull away, so that I didn't realise he'd been doing it, as withdrawn as he was. I like the way it felt, each motion as he swept his hand over my head seemed to light a million things inside me. The only thing bothering me was why I was asleep in the first place. I wanted to believe the lie that everyone else was able to follow, I knew things would be so much simpler if I didn't remember any of this. But did that mean it would be better?

The truth was, Kenneth was the way he was. He needed my blood, and it was as simple as that. But as I felt his hand start to curve around my cheek, I didn't want to believe that reality was quite as simple as it seemed. Feeling his skin against mine, I thought I finally understood. It didn't matter how things were; he did care. The truth could have been

anything - and he would still worry for me. Fighting the want to open my eyes, I realised something.

Despite everything, he did care.

Chapter 9

Blood Stained Ruby Part 9

A Voice Of Doubt

Alethea

"What?" I asked Kenneth as I turned back to him, responding to his expression. I jumped a little when Diana made a noise behind me, and then laughed when I realised what it was, sinking into the lounge chair as I did so, and hoping the movement wasn't too stiff.

I watched the way he looked at me, and took in the weary edge to his gaze as if I was unconcerned. If I was truthful, I was concerned, but I also knew why it

was there. Try as I might, I couldn't seem to get the frantic note out of my voice.

"Nothing," he said quietly. He narrowed his eyes to scrutinise my expression, but I just smile a little before bending to pick up Diana. I felt how stiff she was in my arms, but at least like this I had a reason to aim my face down and hide my expression. "But are you sure you're alright?"

"Of course," I repeated. "Why wouldn't I be?"

I snuck a peek up at his expression, but wished I hadn't. I didn't like what I saw.

Kenneth

For once, I wasn't bothered in the slightest by the creature she held in her arms, and I could tell even unconsciously that the feeling was reciprocal.

Flicking my eyes around again and straining my ears for any implication of a near arrival, I asked, "Where is everyone anyway?"

She shrugged, still looking down. This was probably one the first times I'd seen her hair fall in such an

irritating way across her face when she didn't move it instantly away, and that was the opposite of reassuring. I didn't know what it was about her today, but there was definitely something wrong. Well, when I thought about it, she'd been like this since when I got back yesterday.

I stood, and her eyes immediately jumped up to me, weary and withdrawn. I hadn't seen her like this before. Diana struggled in her arms, but Alethea just ignored her. I stepped back a little and something slipped into her expression; something I didn't want to see, even if I didn't quite understand it.

"Alethea," I said softly, stepping towards her, my hand half outstretched. Her eyes jumped quickly between it and my expression, seeing something I wasn't sure was really there. When she remained still, I really wasn't sure what to make of it. Diana thrashed out a little with me being so close.

Alethea let her arms drop, and my eyes flashed to her cat as she leapt away, not that I got any recognition in return.

Diana

I blinked a few times, just attempting to take in the scene before me. The way she was looking at him was terrifying. She looked so...desperate, I was almost ashamed. I'd seen her tears for him, felt her tension, sensed her aversion, and now she was left like this. I'd watched her deteriorate from the moment he set foot in this house, and now I had to watch her like this...

Though what intrigued me most was the way he looked at her. The satisfied look in his eyes I'd grown to expect had dissolved, and I couldn't quite believe what was left. It wasn't that I didn't understand the worry I saw, or that I couldn't comprehend its reason, but just seeing it from him sent shivers down my spine.

Alethea

"Tell you what," he suggested wearily, turning away slightly. "You get some rest, and I'll-"

"No," I said quickly, grabbing his arm as he turned to leave. The look in his eyes when he glanced back was almost terrified, although I didn't understand why. "Don't leave."

Whatever was in his eyes calmed when he placed his palm against my cheek and looked me straight in the eyes. "Alethea, you need to rest."

I shook my head, possibly a little too frantically. "No, I'm fine."

He clearly didn't believe that, but he didn't ask again. Slowly prising my fingers from his skin, Kenneth connected his gaze to mine and lowered himself gently to the seat beside me. He was just about to speak when the sudden rings of the house phone thrashed through the air.

"Don't go," I said again, feeling myself begin to fall apart even as he only threatened to depart.

As he looked at me with his sparkling sapphire eyes, it was easy to get lost. "Alethea, I'll come back. But-"

"No," I said quickly, shaking my head slightly. Not but...

"Just a few minutes," he promised.

I still shook me head.

"Trust me," he breathed, kissing me lightly and halting my motion before he slid from the room. It was gentle, addictive moments like that that were killing me when he wasn't near. I knew now that he cared about me, but every time he wasn't near my thoughts travelled recklessly back to yesterday's episode with Miranda, and the words I'd had to repeat...

"Alethea!" I distantly heard the voice from the phone shouting. Slowly, I looked at it, a few things in my mind finally become understandable thoughts rather than useless fragments.

Kenneth

I had to look away as I left. I simply couldn't bear to see the shattered expression on her face, but I needed a few minutes at least, although if I was clever about it, it would only be that. Just enough time to find out what really happened that she wouldn't tell me.

Alethea

"Brad," I reasoned eventually, unsure of whether I was cutting across him because of the absurdity of his words or the truth of them that I didn't want to recall. "This is-"

"Please tell me you aren't getting sucked into this? You're better than that - the guy's a player, A, I don't even know what-"

"Stop it Brad! It's not like that - I mean-"

"It is, A," he interrupted. "I've seen you, and you're falling for him. I don't know if you even realise it or not, but I've seen the way you look at him. You're going the same way that every other bloody girl has gone, and frankly, I can't wait for him to move on so that you can get over him!"

"Brad!" I gasped, shocked.

"Don't you 'Brad' me, you're the one who'd totally going against everything! You told me a million times that you don't want anything to do with this. Tell me that now."

I stayed silent.

"Go on! Tell me! Make me believe nothing's changed!"

I had nothing to say to that. It shocked me when I heard words spilling from between my lips, and I especially hated the defensive tone around them. "You know what Brad? Just butt out - this isn't anything to do with you," I told him scornfully.

"This is everything to do with me, I'm not going to let one of my best friends get stuck in the middle of this! You'll regret this all, trust me - you've seen what he does for years, prayed he wouldn't get to you and sworn that when he does you'll do everything you can to stop it! Where that Alethea gone? Eh? The one who's willing to stand up for what she believes in?"

"I'm still here, Brad!" I shouted. "But a girl can change her mind!"

"Yeah," he said sarcastically. "In other words, you're running the same way as the rest of them."

"The rest of them? Brad, these are living, breathing people with names, and feelings, and-" I cut off. I

mentally - and physically - shook myself. "Forget it. You wouldn't understand."

"I what? I understand perfectly!" He paused for a moment and I heard him take a deep breath. When he spoke again, he was calmer. "Look, Alethea, I don't want to fight you. Just...be careful, alright? I don't want to lose you the way we lost Miranda, and-"

"That won't happen," I promised him stiffly. "This is different."

He waited a moment before he said anything else, and I could almost hear his thoughts. "Is that what you think...or what you want to think?"

Brad

Staring at the phone in my hand for a moment, I debated. It had taken me a number of long seconds to move the device from my ear in the first place, and pushing it into my pocket was a harder feat than it sound be, despite the fact that I'd been listening to the dial tone for a good few minutes already. Everything in my mind seemed to be tugging my

decision in different directions, only confusing me more.

"Is she alright?" Lucy asked beside me.

I tried - and apparently failed - to push the conversation to the back of my mind. "She's fine," I replied in a monotone.

"She didn't sound fine," Lucy murmured, looking down. But she didn't take her arm from mine - that was a good sign. It meant that she didn't like fighting any more than I did.

"She will be," I promised. And I knew she would. Kenneth just had to get out of the picture first.

Alethea

"What's the matter?" he asked instantly, stepping back into the room with a torn expression. He was by my side in a second, trying to coax me to look up at him. For a brief moment, I thought I saw his eyes jump to the phone where it had landed across the room, although I couldn't be sure.

I shook my head.

"Alethea," he began sternly. "What happened?"

I swiped furiously as a few tears started to slip from my lashes. I knew it was irrational, but everything Brad had said was so right, and everything that I wanted was so wrong that I simply couldn't care what was rational anymore.

He shook his head too, although I doubt if he realised he was doing it.

I pushed myself up from the sofa, still silent. He didn't need to see this. Yes, when he was here I could believe he wanted me, and whilst I was sure that he did care, I had already seen how quickly his mood could change, and should know better that to rely upon it for something I needed. After realising how good an actor he was, I knew it would be easy to deceive me, should he want to, because I was suddenly so dependent on his presence. Even last night when I'd known I would never normally see him I'd found myself pining to have him beside me.

I stood and looked at the ground as I moved past him. "Nothing," I muttered, trying to convince myself as much as him and biting my lip harshly when I

shifted my weight too far. Ankles don't heal overnight.

He caught my arm and held onto it as he stood too, turning me where I was. I swallowed back the lump in my throat. Kenneth tried to read my expression but I turned my head away from him, letting my hair block his view. "What's wrong?"

"Just leave me alone Kenneth," I said, sounding much more confident than I actually was as I tried to pull away. He didn't let me, only holding my arm tighter.

"Alethea-" he began warningly.

Just when I thought things could be going alright, Brad comes along and reminds me why everything can't. As I looked determinedly down, the tension in Kenneth's hold suddenly became stronger.

"You know what? If he thinks he can-"

My eyes leapt to him. "What? Who?"

Glancing swiftly at me, he moved away, letting go of me. I was frozen for a moment and only just caught my balance before I fell back.

"Kenneth - where are you going?" I asked quickly, worried.

"Just to sort something out," he explained, his tone menacing.

"Where were you yesterday?" I suddenly demanded. There was something inside me that wanted to click, but wouldn't quite make the final move. And could tell that his idea of something to sort out was Brad, if only because I'd seen the way they looked at each other. When he didn't look back, I grabbed his arm, repeating my question. "Where did you go?"

Glancing at me for a mere moment, he shook off my hand without a problem. "It's just like I told you - nowhere important."

Everything connected in my mind. Miranda hadn't been at school. And yesterday, he'd needed to...needed his blood, and then he'd disappeared for a while and the need was gone. He didn't see it as important - but I did.

Kenneth

Kill two birds with one stone - or three depending on how you looked at it.

I worked out that it was just Alethea's blood that was almost unbearably irresistible to me, I sorted out her 'friend' for at least a few days, and I got to spend my time here with Alethea awake instead of unconscious. Yesterday had been rather successful. And now I just wanted to do it again. As I'd expected, in the time I'd left - which was clearly longer than I thought, although I still knew who'd called - I'd discovered exactly what had happened.

The way she looked at me was so different. I hated to see it, but it was impossible not to notice how much she was relying on me now, and I knew it was something she hated as well.

At least I knew why she wouldn't tell me. Anything to do with Miranda and she kept it to herself. If it wasn't so stressful, it would have been pitiful. And now that Brad was making a mess of things - why couldn't they all leave her be? They were making things much harder than they had to be.

I could see the battle in her eyes as to what to say, so I spoke first. "Alethea, I have to go, alright? I'll come back - as soon as I can. And I won't go again. Not today, alright?"

She wanted to accept that. She wanted to understand it and believe it, but everything the phone call had lit in her was telling her not to. There was a reason I chose to ignore his useless glares and fumes, but this was pushing things too far. I could see I wasn't going to get a response from her, and whilst I thought I might regret it, I knew it would be better in the long run as I pulled away from her grasp. The longer I left this, the worse it got. I was going to sort him out - and then he would have the guts to give me one of those antagonising, fiery glares he seemed so prone to.

But that was before she was in front of me and her lips were crushing mine. My arms had to fold around her as she collapsed against me, the sudden movement being the opposite of helpful to her injured leg. I wanted to have this sorted out, but I didn't want to go.

It was only after I realised how much she needed this that I really let it happen.

Alethea

Then, he was kissing me back.

This wasn't like anything else, this was urgent, and reviving. It was everything that I'd wanted and feared since this all began, everything I thought I'd lost, I'd dreamt and imagined. The pressure of his lips on mine combated every thought that Brad had planted in my mind with unnerving ease, the explosions ringing through my ears pushing everything else away. The beats of my heart in my chest were racing, speeding with every touch of his skin to mine, and getting faster with each passing moment. It was the perfect fantasy, and kept the tears and memories fighting me back.

Until it all crashed when he pulled away for air. It was only then that I realised how desperate I was for the substance as well. After a few painful moments, he leant back in. That was when it all shattered.

"No, Kenneth - stop it," I said breathlessly, stepping away and looking anywhere but him. His hold was so light that it broke when I moved. I'd had enough. I started that as a diversion, and it'd done the trick, but with everything playing on my mind right then, it was impossible not to realise how pointless it all was. I was only setting myself up for a further fall.

"Stop what?"

I didn't know how to say it. "Just stop it - all of it."

"Alethea?"

I looked at him, everyone's advice ringing in my mind. He stepped towards me, but I moved back. I felt the wall behind me, and then felt the guilt crush me on top of everything else to see the confusion on his expression. The anger on it was all but gone, and that would have been good if I hadn't seen the hurt that replaced it.

A Change Of Heart

"Kenneth, I don't want this. I just can't do it."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I'm just - I'm scared."

"What is there to be afraid of?"

"There's everything. I just don't want to be...I can't."

"Why? Alethea, what are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid of...of...knowing what's going to happen, and still letting it happen. Even when I know I can't stop it, I know I'll still try."

"What do you think is going to happen?"

"I know you're going to leave, and I can't...I know I won't be able to stop you. But I'll try. And I-"

"Alethea. Alethea. I won't leave."

"You will. I know you will, and I just don't know if I..."

"I won't, Alethea."

"You will."

"I won't Alethea. And that's a promise."

"Kenneth..."

"Just believe me. Trust me?"

"I..."

"Alethea - listen. I will not leave you. Nothing could make me leave."

"You mean it."

"More than anything."

Chapter 10

Blood Stained Ruby Part 10

Part 10 - double figures! I apologise in advance - there's probably a load of mistakes in here, but I'll change them as I see them. This chapter's a little strange, but I hope you like it

A Full Moment

Kenneth

After a long moment, I gave in, knocking again.

"Coming!" Alethea called again. I waited for a moment, but didn't hear any further movement. I waited a few seconds and then knocked one more time. She didn't say anything but I smirked when I

heard her irritated sigh at my impatience. Still no result. I tried again.

She pulled the door open, but didn't look at me. She had her eyes glued to the book in her hand. She moved out of the way, and when I stepped into the house she hit the door shut with her hip. I smiled to see the intent look in her eyes; it was focused, but soft. Without any acknowledgement, I watched her trace her way back to the lounge and sink into the closest seat.

Her expression softened more as she read and a small smile pulled at her lips. I was tempted to say something, but decided against it. Knowing her, she'd be furious if I interrupted her any worse than I already had. She turned the last page of the book and blinked when she finished it, her eyes far away. I noted the look in them and frowned disapprovingly.

"What?" she asked, instantly defensive, when she eventually saw.

"You haven't been up all night?" I asked her. She looked slightly sheepish and dropped her gaze.

Fiddling with the corner of her book distractedly, she waited a moment before replying.

"Well, not all night," she mumbled. "Most of the night I suppose."

I just looked at her.

"What?" she asked again, her eyes leaping back up to mine and reading my expression. "I can't help it if it's a good book."

I only laughed. She looked relieved. "What's it about?"

"A lot of things," she explained. "But I don't think you'd be interested."

I laughed. "Try me."

Unconvinced, she raised an eyebrow. "Romance?"

"Definitely not my kind of book," I allowed.

"And time travel," she finished.

"Time travel?" I repeated. She nodded keenly. And I thought I was strange. "Personally, I can't see the two of them having any link at all."

"It's complicated," she said simply, shrugging a little. "But basically there's this guy, and the girl he love dies, so he goes back in time. When she eventually survives, he has to leave her, and then he dies."

"But let me guess," I said, teasing. "They still manage to live happily ever after?"

She scowled at me. "If that's the way you want to put it."

"Ok," I agreed. "At the risk of truly regretting this in a moment, why did he have to leave her? Isn't the point of saving her that they get to be, you know, together?"

"Yeah, but - this is where it gets confusing - he has to have this kid with someone else, but it's better that she's alive and they're apart than that she's just dead. Well, that's what he thinks, but now instead of having to live without her, he has to live with knowing that he's hurt her and left her. But he is still happy. Sort of."

"What do you mean?"

"He has his daughter to look after, and he loves her, so that's ok. And he knows what could have happened, but that he stopped it."

I raised an eyebrow, surprised. "You mean he can just switch it off? The feeling upset? Just like that?"

"Not exactly," she told me dubiously, probably analysing my tone. "But, I suppose, when he's distracted, it's harder to feel sad. That's just how people work."

"U-huh," I registered dully. That's just how humans work anyway. I asked my next question from her tone rather than her words. "I take it the woman wasn't too happy either?"

"Not really," she admitted, slightly awkward. "But that would be why she jumped off of the bridge," she added under her breath.

An expression that hadn't hit my face in a long while took over. Shock. She was reading books about people jumping off of bridges? Since when?

"But still," she shook it off. "Then time goes really fast, well, that's what it's meant to seem like, up until he dies."

"It's death, suicide, separation and basic tragedy," I stated. It was easy to see she was enjoying this, so although the whole thing seemed absurd, I couldn't bring myself to want it to stop. "It's almost worth Shakespeare with all his deaths and magic."

She shook her head and looked at the book in her hands.

"Go on then," I sighed. "Tell me how it ends if you must."

"I'm not going to tell you how it ends," she told me bluntly.

I laughed. "So you'll tell me all the bad bits, up to the bit where the main character dies, but not the part where they live happily ever after?"

"That only happens in fairytales," she told me, smiling a little.

"And romance novels," I finished. She only shrugged.

Her expression changed to considering for a moment, and she stroked her fingers down the edge of the book, her eyes following the movement. "What would you change if you could go back in time?"

Alethea

The expressions that crossed his face were strange. Obviously, my question wasn't something people normally had to think about, but some of the things I saw were odd even for me.

"It's...I..." he stuttered. After a brief moment, he shook his head fiercely, his tone almost angry. "Who knows? It's fiction - total fiction, and it doesn't matter anyway."

I was more than a little startled by the outburst. "Ok. I mean, you're right - doesn't really matter, but still-"

"But nothing - it won't happen, and doesn't make a difference."

I lapsed into silence, looking guiltily up to him. I supposed I should have thought a bit more about the question before I asked; there would be people who knew exactly what they wanted to change, but

wouldn't want to admit to it. And when Kenneth didn't want to admit to something, he got defensive, instantly, and angry at whatever it was that was making him feel vulnerable. Seeing as he barely ever felt that way, I thought I could partially understand why he got so annoyed at my question.

"What book is it anyway?" he muttered harshly.

I looked down, my words barely more than a whisper. "'Will you be there?'"

He was looking away from me, leaning heavily on his forearm, placed on the far wall. I could almost feel the tension emanating from him. I regretted asking it, but I still wondered. Obviously, it wasn't a question I was going to get an answer to, but I couldn't help the curiosity stirring inside me.

Without warning, he straightened up.

"Come on, let's go," he suggested, offering me his hand. I took it, a little gingerly, letting him pull me gently to my feet. "I don't fancy being here when your parents get back, wherever they've vanished off to today. Are they ever here?"

I wasn't expecting the question that he tagged onto the end of his speech so it took me a moment to reply. "They are, just not recently. Charlie's been having loads of trouble sleeping lately, and not feeling too good, so after all the work..."

"Where do you want to go?" he asked, sensing that this was a subject I didn't want to go into.

"Kenneth, I can't get around anywhere," I reminded him. "I'm having enough trouble walking around the house."

"True," he allowed, snaking an arm around my waist. I shivered, but it was more because the motion was familiar than anything else, and I knew that now was different to all those other times. "But that gives me an excuse to do this."

"And you want to?" I checked, surprised by his confidence.

"Yes," he breathed, kissing my neck. I relaxed after a moment. I knew that might mean something different to him than it did to me, but for a moment, I didn't care. Feeling the smile fall onto my lips, I

decided - just for a while - that I simply wouldn't care.

All I cared about right then was the feeling that surged inside me to know he did want to. That he did want me.

Fiona

"Wake up, sleepy head," I said, pushing my way into my - temperamental - daughter's bedroom. I thought the mass beneath the duvet stirred, but I couldn't be sure. I sighed a little, but kept the positive note in my voice, hoping it would help. I walked over and shook the body beneath the covers a little to wake her up. "Come on, lazy bones, today's a big day."

"Go away," she groaned, rolling over, away from me.

I rolled my eyes. It was one of those mornings. "Up you get, sweet cakes, it's already ten - if you sleep any longer I'll start worrying you've slipped into a coma."

"You do that," she muttered moodily. "I'm not going."

I looked around her room. I'd seen kids of five years old try and trash their rooms, leaving suitcases

empty, and sometimes hidden, to prevent their parents from making them move, but having my daughter try the same thing was almost hurtful. Did she honestly think that just because she wasn't packed, I'd be letting her get away with it?

"You are," I assured her, keeping my voice light, just like George had told me to. "Now come on, babe, you've got a lot to do."

She groaned loudly.

Lucy

My hands were shaking as they reached for the parcel on my bed. My old bed. I hadn't slept here in almost a month. I wasn't entirely sure why I'd come up today, but now I was glad I had - or so I thought. Dad flew out to America today. I guess I was hoping that I would have the chance to see him before he left, although I knew it was stupid - he wouldn't want to spend his last day in England in the same tattered, old house that he felt he'd had to leave.

Just the air here was so terrible. I'd gotten out of this house as soon as I could, but when I eventually got

here today - the product of a lot of saved pocket money and a lot of time pouring over bus schedules - I'd practically glided through the house; the surroundings were so familiar to me. This was where I grew up, but to be here and have such a horrible tension around me made it seem so wrong. While I was physically stood here, the atmosphere made it almost impossible to remember anything good.

The brown parcel paper fell away from the package as soon as my fingertips stroked it, and pulled back to reveal one of the most exquisite paintings I'd ever seen. Given, he hadn't spoken to me for those first two weeks, but I think he was just hoping the whole thing could blow over - he didn't expect Mum to change everything until it was so serious.

Carefully pulling the wrapping away from the canvas, I felt the tears in my eyes start to boil over as I saw what Dad had left for me.

Alethea

"Huh," I said, pulling out my phone again. If there had been a message, it would have beeped and vibrated, so I would have sensed it, but I still couldn't

resist the urge to check one last time. "She still hasn't replied. That's unlike her. Do you reckon Brad would..."

I let my words trailed off. I knew that Kenneth hated that, but he overlooked it that time - presumably because he didn't want Brad's name coming into the conversation. If Lucy had texted me back telling me she could come tonight, it was inevitable that Brad would be there too - something that Kenneth was aware of, but didn't acknowledge. Seeing as I had no reply whatsoever, I guessed she couldn't come.

"Kenneth," I began, my eyes scanning the street around us and recognising it instantly. "Where are we going?"

He gave me an odd look. "I don't know, do I? I'm following you."

"Ah," I choked out. That would explain it.

"Why?" he joked. "You haven't gotten us lost?"

I shook my head. "No, not lost. I know exactly where we are."

I couldn't tell if he noticed the off tone to my voice of not, but, judging from the glance he shot my way, he did. I really hoped Miranda was out somewhere today.

"Something wrong?" he asked. I shook my head, although I wasn't sure the motion was convincing. I suspected that he noticed when I sped up, just slightly, despite how small I tried to make the change. Then again, it made it extremely difficult to pass that sort of thing off as unnoticed when he was taking half of my weight.

I felt my expression change when I saw the huge van outside of Miranda's house. Part of me wanted to be past this street and as far from here as possible, but the conscious part wanted to know what that van was doing there. Miranda and I were so distant right now that I had absolutely no idea what it could be doing there. As I watched, I saw Fiona walk out from behind it. It looked as if they were moving out. Beside her was a man I thought I'd seen a few times before. What was his name? John? No...

"Alethea?" Kenneth asked, squeezing me a little since I'd stopped.

As if she'd heard him, Fiona looked up, connecting her gaze instantly to mine. She smiled warmly, and bustled over to us; he didn't stray further than her shadow - his eyes were watching me with such protectiveness it almost hurt. "Alethea - how are you, doll? I haven't seen you around here for eons!"

I swallowed. "I'm...cool, thanks. You?"

"Perfect! It's a big day," she beamed. She gestured to the small flat behind her. "We're finally getting out of here, Miranda and me! I admit, things could be better if we could go together - but her dad's wanted her back to stay for years, and George's house just isn't big enough for three..."

George, that was it.

"Wait, what?" I suddenly asked, her words sinking in. "She's going to stay with her Dad? Isn't he a few hours away?"

She nodded a little. "Up in London. She's being mighty stubborn about it all as well - hasn't come out of her room this morning."

I just stared.

"Didn't she tell you?" Fiona asked innocently, honestly shocked.

I shook my head and was suddenly conscious of just how much of my weight Kenneth was holding - not that it fazed him in the least.

"You couldn't have a word with her, could you? I mean, calm her down and all before she goes? She refuses to listen to me - and her Dad'll be down soon to pick her up. I've got to go in a little while as well, unload all of this"- she gestured behind her and the van that had originally captured my attention-"at George's place, and I can't bear the thought of leaving Princess in the state that she is..."

"I - I don't think-" I stammered.

"Please, love? You'd be doing me a huge favour..."

I bit my lip. "I could try..."

It was only a few minutes later that I was tracing my way through the familiar layout of my best friend's house, trying not to dread what was coming. She was moving - she was really, truly leaving - the idea just would sink in. And she hadn't told me. Kenneth was outside. Only God knew how much I wanted him beside me - but, right now, Miranda was far more important.

Cautiously, I pushed open the frail door into her bedroom.

She was facing away from me, but she heard my entrance. Looking at all of her possessions which still scattered the floor, I could only imagine how much she didn't want to go. She used to talk all the time about going to live with her dad - every time she'd be going to see him for one weekend, she'd be thrilled, but it was obvious how much she hated this.

"What do you-" she began shouting, whipping around to face me. When she realised who it was, she fell silent, glaring, as she tried to think of something to say.

"Hey Randa," I said nervously.

Susan

"She's gone again," I said, exasperated.

"Gone?" Harry repeated in disbelief. "Gone where? She can barely move!"

I sighed. "I know. What do you reckon we should do?"

One of my hands was holding the phone to my ear, the other was playing with the small black box in my pocket, and just itching towards the fluorescent lighter beneath it.

The was a moment of silence down the line. "I don't know. But we can't do anything until we see her - we'll think about it later."

I nodded, taking in his words.

He hung up soon after.

I was losing my daughter. Yes, I knew she had to grow up - but in the last month, she'd gotten so distant, and all she was doing was keeping secrets. Well, I couldn't really say anything about that. My little girl was almost missing with the amount of time she spent away from here, and my baby boy was never feeling

good - always crying and screaming about something we couldn't understand.

Inhaling and feeling the relief of the grey smog around me as it invaded my lungs, I really didn't know what to do.

Alethea

"Miranda, please?"

I really didn't know what I wanted to say to her, or what I could say if given the chance, but to be stood here when I so dearly wanted to be outside and have her screaming at me was beyond what I could handle.

She threw her hands up, positively glaring at me. "What is there to say? Why should I listen to anything you've got to tell me? After Thursday-"

"I'm not here to lecture you about that and tell you that I made the whole thing up," I snapped. "Miranda - that is exactly what really, truly, honestly happened - and I can't do anything about that!"

"Do you honestly think I care? It happened - it's over and done with - and from this afternoon, you'll be able to enjoy every single aspect of your brilliant new life without me ruining the picture!"

"Miranda," I gasped, shocked. "You're - I'm - we're not-"

"Whatever," she spat, stalking out of the room. Swallowing every ounce of pain ripping through me, I followed her.

"Miranda - I'm not trying to kick you out! I'm not trying to move on or get away from you like you seem to think I am - I'm actually trying to talk to you! Will you at least listen?"

"Why? So that you can tell me about something else I'm missing out on? So that I can actually hear you say that you don't want anything to do with me? Thanks but no thanks, I've got better things to do with my time."

Pulling to a halt, I decided to try a different approach. She might not want to listen to me, but she wasn't going to walk away without the last word - she'd

never been able to ignore an insult. "It hardly looks like it."

She froze.

Ignoring the twists as my stomach churned inside me, I kept going, knowing that this would pull some kind of response from her. "Fuming all day about some imaginary problem that's all in your head and then storming out the second someone tries to talk to you doesn't seem worth the effort to be honest. You spend all your time trying to work out exactly why all of this is someone else's fault - when you're just making a big deal out of something that barely even bothers you!"

When she turned back to me, there was fire in her eyes.

"Go on," I told her harshly. "Tell me what is actually bothering you right now. Any other day - you wouldn't be furious that I was talking to you, so that isn't it. You never fight with your mum, and I know it isn't because you have to move away - just last month you were telling me how much you wished you could get away from here. You don't throw temper

tantrums unless you want attention, and - while that's something your mum refuses to notice - you know that the second you set foot in your dad's apartment you'll have everything you want every second of the day because he absolutely adores you."

"Stop it!" she shouted. "Stop acting like you know everything about me - you don't know me at all! You think you know everything, Alethea Day, just because you've got some guy lusting after you who'll be gone in a few weeks!"

I looked at her for a moment. My voice was quiet. "So that's what you're so angry about. You're revolving this all around Kenneth, and blaming it all on me. Well, whatever you might think you want - I can promise you that you-"

"Do NOT lecture me," she warned. "Don't try and convince me that you don't want him every bit as much as I do - you just happen to be the lucky pig who gets what she wants for a few months at a time! I know you want him, I know you look at him every day with the same adoration in your eyes - just the same as every other person has - I know you

wouldn't leave him if you got the chance, and don't, for one minute, try and convince me that he isn't waiting outside for you when you burst down into tears because of our little spat! You've told me a million times that you don't want him already, and I don't need to hear it again!"

"I wasn't going to say that," I said, my voice close to a whisper.

She narrowed her eyes. "Well, I don't care in the slightest what you were going to say, so just save me the trouble and get out of my house."

I didn't say anything. My chest was so tight that, even if I'd known what to say, I doubted if I could. Her reaction to that silence was the return of the same look in her eyes that I'd seen before - the one that told me there was still a trace of the friend I once knew somewhere inside her. Part of my mind was just repeating something I'd wished for before - that she'd just calm down and we would be able to be friends - but the main part was trying to work out what to do. If that look had been there, there must be a way to get it back, I just had to find it. Taking her

hand from the front door handle before I could speak again, she raced past me and slammed her bedroom door.

I turned away from the front door, part of me wishing that I had the courage to go back again.

"Come on," Kenneth said darkly, appearing behind me. I wasn't shocked that he was instantly at my side, and as he slid his arm around my waist again, I really didn't know what to do. I just knew that I wanted to get away from this.

Sam

"Sam?" Lucy's strangled voice came down the line. Everyone noticed as I got immediately stiff. "Can you come get me?"

"Of course," I said, standing instantly. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes tops, alright?"

"'K," she whispered, hanging up. She'd known where she was going today this morning, but I would have thought her mum would have gone with her. Of course, I also knew how much she wouldn't want her there, but still...

"Hey man, what's the rush?" Luke asked, glancing up from his cards as I grabbed my coat. "Got a date or something?"

"Not even close," I told him. I hadn't quite told them that Dad was getting remarried yet, and I didn't intend to for a while. I wasn't quite sure what I was telling them about Lucy when she and her mum actually moved in, but I decided I'd face that when I got there. "But I've gotta jet."

After a long, antagonising car journey - when I noticed that my knuckles were almost white against the wheel - I finally pulled up, hearing my car splutter to a halt in a way that sounded less than healthy.

"Luce, you ok?" I asked her the second she got in. I would've gotten out first, but she seemed so desperate to get away I decided not to make her stay any longer than she had to. I ignored the package she put on the back seat as I turned the key again.

"Fine," she sniffed, rubbing at her bloodshot eyes.

We carried on in silence for a while, but I really didn't know what to say.

"I didn't recognise the number you called from," I pointed out eventually, glancing at her.

She looked down. "I know. It was a pay phone - I didn't want to take my mobile with me in case Mum called."

I slowed the car a little. "She still worries about you, you know. She'd only have called to check you're alright."

"Yeah, I know," she said, her voice cracking. "I just...didn't want her to know."

The drive back was longer. Or rather, it seemed that way.

"Look, Luce," I began, pulling the keys from the exhaust when we reached her street. "You-"

"You're gonna tell me I shouldn't wander off," she realised, smiling a little.

"Yeah, I am," I pointed out. "You're lucky I knew where you were."

Something else slowly trickled into her expression. "Yeah...how did you know where I was?"

I smirked, pulling a booklet from the pocket of the car door. She saw what it was instantly. "A bit of advice: don't leave timetables and maps lying around - people might get suspicious."

"'K," she acknowledged, although she didn't say anything else.

Sighing, I replaced the key and pushed the car the last few meters to her house. She got out without a word, and after a moment, I did as well. She turned away when I opened up the engine, curious about the source of the coughing my car seemed to have acquired.

"Oh, Mark, hey," Lucy stammered, shocking me. I cursed when I hit my head from straightening up by the car too quickly, rubbing it harshly. I squinted in the direction of her house to see her swiping at her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I thought you'd be with Brad?" the unwanted visitor asked, feigning innocence. I narrowed my eyes. Who

did he think he was? She was practically in tears, and he was asking questions about some petty jealousy that he had on his mind. I slammed the bonnet of my car, but neither of them stirred.

She shook her head. "I wasn't...I mean, I didn't want him to..."

Before the conversation could get too far, I wandered over. Neither of them looked at me until I spoke, although I noticed Lucy relax slightly.

"Come on, Luce," I said, putting an arm around her shoulders. The look that Mark gave me was venomous. "Let's get you inside."

"Thanks," she breathed gratefully the second we were out of earshot.

Kenneth

"You're awake," I realised, looking back to her.

I saw the small smile pulling at her lips when she opened her eyes, although she looked strangely guilty as well. "Yeah."

I laughed at her expression. "What's wrong?"

After looking at me for a moment, Alethea let whatever it was go and relaxed next to me. "Nothing."

Her eyes flitted across my expression when I felt my eyebrows pull together in confusion. I looked away, but my eyes leapt back to her after a moment. "What happened on Thursday?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean 'what happened on Thursday?'" I repeated. "She...said something about Thursday..."

Her eyes became weary. "You mean Miranda?"

I nodded.

She looked down, suddenly interested in her hand as it traced lightly across the sheet. After a moment, she shook her head a little. "Nothing happened."

I sat up, and her eyes followed the motion wearily. I waited as she scrutinised my expression, and didn't speak until her eyes were on mine. "That's not true - I know that's not true. What happened?"

She looked down, debating. As she pulled her legs up under her, she twisted away from me slightly so that her hair fell across her face and I couldn't see what played there. "Nothing...important happened."

I moved, sliding off the bed to stand in front of her. She looked up to me and I offered a hand to pull her to her feet. She was cautious as she took it, but I held her stable as she swayed. After a moment, I asked, "Alethea, what happened? I know I wasn't there, but-"

"Nothing worth worrying about," she told me quietly.

I lifted her chin until she was looking at me again. "You are worrying, and I want to know why."

She didn't say anything.

"Come on," I urged her. "You aren't going to convince me that I imagined it - I know that she mentioned it, and I need to know what happened."

"You don't need to know," she muttered, pulling back a little and looking away again. She glanced at me sceptically. "How would you have heard it anyway?"

Although I didn't know what doubts were playing in her eyes, I told her the only thing I could. A little guilt lingered in my thoughts as I said it, but it wasn't a lie. It just wasn't the whole truth. "You two weren't exactly keeping your exchange quiet back there, were you?"

Alethea

I wanted to move away from him - or at least have some kind of subject change in my mind that might distract him - but I couldn't. I didn't want to admit to the fight on Thursday, but I couldn't quite tell whether I wanted him to know. I didn't want to confess to what I'd really said to her, but I wanted so dearly to hear him reassuring me in the soft, gentle way that I knew he could.

"Why are you so tense?" he asked me quietly.

I looked down again. At least that was slightly better, my current tension didn't involve Miranda, so, if I did this right, I'd be able to keep the conversation away from her. "I'm tense because...I'm not ready to be on my own."

"And you're not on your own," he pointed out softly, running a hand through my hair. I tilted my head towards his hand and he turned his palm to my cheek. "So what's the matter?"

"I can tell you're going to disappear," I whispered. "You're going to vanish off somewhere for another day, and I'll barely see you. Like you said, you weren't there on Thursday."

"But I came back, didn't I?"

"Yes," I allowed. "And then you tried to leave again on Friday."

"But I still came back-"

"And then you regretted it," I interrupted. "And tried to leave again."

His hand as it curved around my cheek was comforting. "But I didn't. I stayed."

I turned my head away.

"You had a fight with her," he stated simply, twisting the conversation back to something I didn't want to talk about. "On Thursday. I know that."

I glanced at him. How did he know that? He wasn't there - that much I was sure of. But, I supposed, every other body in our school would know about that, so there wasn't really any reason for him not to. I just had a particular aversion to him knowing, mainly because that fight - and most of our others - had been about him.

"I just don't see why you're so worked up by it," he continued, hinting at a question with his tone, even if he didn't voice it again.

I stayed silent.

"Alethea, will you relax?" he said finally, dropping his hand to his side from where it had hovered beside me, hoping for me to turn back. "I'm not going anywhere. Just calm down."

I believed that - that he wasn't going anywhere.

"And tell me what's wrong," he finished.

"What time is it?" I asked after a moment, realising the darkness that was slipping into the room through the window was deepening to reveal the night sky. This was probably the first time I'd been grateful that

my watch had snapped; it gave me something to say rather than something I could just check and ignore.

He chuckled, although I suspected he was far from dropping the subject - I had no doubt that we'd be revisiting this conversation later. "Just gone seven, don't worry."

My jaw dropped, and I looked from the window - my only visible source for a time check - to his expression to check if he was joking or not. "No! That means that we missed your-"

"I know," he laughed, entertained by my expression. "I guess we'll have to go tomorrow. If we're lucky, your friends won't be able to make it then either."

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

He pulled me close and kissed me gently. It was so easy to forget everything in moments like that. "Don't be."

Harry

When I got home, Susan was no-where in sight. Ever since we'd got back from London, she'd been all over

the place - I could barely keep track of her. And every time I tried to confront her about it, she just laughed it off or gave me some false excuse before flitting out the door. I shook my head a little.

"Aw, well, champ," I said cheerily, pulling Charlie from the car. "It looks like it's just you and me again."

He mumbled something.

I breathed a sigh of relief to see him nodding off. We simply couldn't work out what was keeping him up at night, but to see him getting a little peace almost made me forget about it. Maybe it was just a stage and he'd be over it soon.

I took him upstairs and laid him gently down, hoping that he'd stay in his slumber for a little while longer.

I distinctly remembered setting the alarm before I left - and that was only twenty minutes ago. That either meant that Susan had been and gone while I was out and forgotten to reset it, or...

I edged open Alethea's bedroom door and shook my head when I saw her. Whatever it was that she was doing while she was out all day, it clearly drained her

if she couldn't keep her eyes open for ten minutes after she got back.

Kenneth

"I thought you were going to do something about that blasted dog of yours!" I exclaimed, slamming the front door. I heard its hinges strain and squeak in protest. Amos appeared and looked at the door wearily.

"I will...eventually. I don't get why you don't like him personally - he's great," he said dubiously.

"Great?" I shouted. He looked shocked. "Great? He is most certainly NOT great - he tries to take a chunk out of me every time I walk up the drive!"

He looked through the shattered window beside the door, presumably at the shape bounding against it in an attempt to get in. An attempt that - if $$ever successful - would end in either me or him injured. Whilst I had no doubt that I'd be able to, in a word, disable him, with that snapping jaw of his it wouldn't surprise me if Llewellyn managed to get a few swipes in beforehand, as humiliating as it was to admit.

Grimacing when I let my eyes slip down to my arm, I realised it was worse than I thought. I growled a little, glancing back to the shaking door and clenching my fist. "That dog is going to get it one day - one day soon. Either you do something about him, or I will - and trust me, my version won't be at all pleasant."

Lizzie

I flicked my eyes across the bar, scoping everything out. I frowned at the stage, it was tiny - there'd never be a decent music set up there. There was supposed to be a live band tonight, although I expected they'd either be completely rubbish or they'd be so late that they barely had time to get in the door before they got fired.

"Ok, people!" Someone called. I turned, slowly, intending to look at the speaker - I could've sworn I'd heard that voice before. "We need to get this place sorted out in the next few hours! Ryan, go clear a bit of space over there - John, go sort out the electrics. No, you moron, over there. Ed, go unload the stuff from the truck."

He sounded organised. And familiar. Who was it?

"Issy, do us a favour and go find out if this place can make anything adequate for consumption. Janey...I don't know - go and do whatever it is you do."

I froze when I recognised who was speaking. Oh, good Lord, no. Stiffly, I started to move away, hoping beyond hope that I could get through the door without anyone noticing me.

"And Lizzie, get over here right now and stop hiding from me."

I cussed under my breath, turning on the spot.

His eyes were hard and cold when he looked at me. I wanted to leave - I could be through the door in a second if I wanted to. Theoretically. So why were my legs moving me closer to him in the way that he lifted his hand and gestured me to?

I stopped a few feet away from him, trying to control my expression. I didn't think I succeeded - but I couldn't possibly have looked as bad as I felt. Still with a stone glare, he closed the space between us in

two, brisk steps. I gasped, cringing away from his hand as he grabbed my arm.

"Don't, Byron...please..."

"You left me. No warning, no talk, to anything - just left."

For a moment, I couldn't think of anything to say. When I didn't speak, it wasn't my choice and I heard the words shake uncontrollably. Even as I spoke, I knew he could tell I was lying. "I didn't have a choice, I-"

Without releasing my arm, he brought his other hand fiercely across my face. I bit down on my tongue, fighting against how much it stung.

He just carried on glaring.

Alethea

I gasped a little, squinting my eyes against the pain.

"It's only been four days," I repeated, unsure of who I was directing my excuses at now as I sat back down again. "I bet if we leave it another-"

The doctor shook his head. "This isn't an only. You need to rest it for a while, and we still might need to bandage it up. How much weight have you been putting on that ankle since you sprained it?"

I looked down. "Not too much..."

"She went out yesterday," Dad input helpfully.

I glared at him.

The doctor nodded again. "Ok...how about before that? I doubt it would have swollen that much from one trip out so long after you hurt it."

"Well, I had school," I explained. "But there wasn't anything aside from that. I rested it as much as I could at the time, but it's hard in-between lessons and things..." I trailed off.

There was a moment of silence.

"Ok," he said, decided. "I think we're best putting a bandage on it for now, and we'll just see how it is in a week, ok? It doesn't seem too bad - but wrapping it up is a precaution, alright?"

"Ok," I agreed dubiously.

A little while later, I limped back to the car, aided by Dad, who was smirking the whole way. I had a nudging suspicion that what was fuelling that grin was the way the doctor had told me I was to stay in as much as possible, although I had mentioned I was meant to be going out tonight...Dad wasn't too pleased, but at least he had the knowledge that I had the medical limit of only a few hours when I could be out.

"Did you absolutely have to wake me up so early?" I asked him as we got into the car, stifling a yawn.

"The early bird catches the worm," he recited.

"Worms are disgusting," I retorted simply.

I was tired, still, although I couldn't say why. But even as I realised that the car journey was far too bumpy to get a decent sleep, I was comfortable in the knowledge that I wasn't worried about what Kenneth would say this time. Two weeks ago, I would have been terrified, but now...it only bothered me that it meant I'd be away from him for longer.

Lizzie

"Byron-" I protested, squirming when he steered me away from everything else. He tightened his grip on me. He twisted my arm painfully when I tried to move away, and I ended up gasping for breath as he forced me forwards.

He pushed me into the back room, and shoved me forwards so that I fell to the floor. I rolled onto my back so that I was looking up at him as he snapped the door shut and locked it, standing just inside the door. I flinched away when he turned to me again, dropping his keys carelessly onto the table beside the door.

Terrified, I pushed away from him and to my feet, barely daring to blink.

"What the hell happened?" he demanded. I just stepped back, unable to answer. "One day, you were there - and the next I woke up and you were bloody gone!"

I bit the inside of my cheek nervously.

"You just stay here until I get back," he commanded, furious, as he turned away again. "I've got to go sort

those idiots out, and can't have you slipping away again."

Something snapped inside of me, and I found my voice. "Byron - I can't! I've got to get going, and even if I didn't-"

"And what are you going to do about it? If I tell you to stay - you stay, got that?"

"Stop ordering me about! You've already done enough of that!"

He hit me again, although this time, it was a straight punch to the stomach. I doubled over, my eyes closing automatically. They flew open when he grabbed my hair, pulling me upright again.

"Don't you talk back to me," he spat, spinning me around so that my back was to the door and throwing me back against it.

On impulse, I grabbed his keys off the side counter. I could get out of that door, locked or unlocked - him, on the other hand...I tossed them out of the far window, smiling a bit when I heard the chink as the metal hit the ground.

I glanced out of the window. Second story. I liked that.

"Lizzie!" he shouted, lunging for me.

I squeaked as I dodged him. I already knew what I was doing when he swivelled around, and I grabbed his arm, twisting it down in front of me and holding it stiffly against my body. Without a second thought, I bit into his neck. His blood was foul. It just sickening, but I kept drinking until he was unconscious.

I shuddered, spitting it out of the floor as I wiped my mouth.

He collapsed on the floor before me. I kicked him away, disgusted that I'd had to do that. I thought I'd lost him when I got on the plane to Spain last year. Even if he'd been able to trace that, he wouldn't have caught up to the trip to Japan the week after. Since then, I hadn't spent more than a month in one place - even this visit home was less than two.

I leaped out of the window, just as I'd always done back at the house, flipping a little. I could already feel

the adrenaline in my veins fading as I touched against the ground.

Kenneth

"Hey. All set for tonight?"

"I'm working on it, Kenneth, but I'm busy for the next few hours," she told me awkwardly.

I frowned. "What?"

"Mark's coming ov-" she cut off. "That's him! Gotta go!"

She hung up. I scowled. He sure had bad timing, that one.

Sam

"Alright, alright! I'm coming!" I yelled in the direction of the door, irritated. What was with some people? Don't they realise that when you ring the doorbell, it take people time to stop whatever they're doing? Especially if that happens to be trying to work out what's going on with the car engine so that they don't need to pay the mechanic.

I wrenched open the door, scowling, only to see the same ginger-haired boy from yesterday waiting at the door.

I wasn't in a good mood. "What do you want?"

"I'm-"

"Hey, Mark," Lucy said coming up behind me. I looked at her for a moment, but she just ignored me. I just shook my head and went back through to the garage, but that didn't mean I missed the conversation. "Listen...I was going to call you...about tonight - something's come up..."

Lizzie

"Damn!" I yelled. "Damn! Damn! Damn!"

I hadn't meant to be quite that loud. Amos came in a few moments later, his eyes scanning the room. "What happened?"

"Nothing," I said moodily, throwing everything over my shoulder. Maybe I'd just missed it. I couldn't possibly have left my bag this morning. Amos dodged the pillows and cases that flew his way, luckily. I

picked up the pace as I started throwing harder things across the room, searching. I couldn't have left it. The fact that I didn't exactly recall picking it up was completely unrelated - I could not have left it behind.

Kenneth was going there tonight - taking Alethea for at least one night out - maybe I could...but what would I look like if I had to ask him to pick something up? I didn't even have any proof that it was there, let alone any idea of precisely where it was. And if Byron got his hands on it, he'd have moved it just to make things difficult for me.

"Where is it?" I yelled - almost as thought the volume would summon the object back to me. "Where on Earth is it?"

"What? Liz, calm down," Amos said.

I was careful to keep the left side of my face away from him. "My bag! The one that I had yesterday! That was first edition from France, Paris, at the most exclusive store - and has everything in it! All my phone numbers, my contacts, my travel details -

heck, I'm useless without it! I don't even know when I'm leaving without that!"

"March 5th, isn't it?"

"Helpful," I said sarcastically. "So when's the next flight after that? What time does it leave? Who am I booked to stay and meet up with? Where am I going? What time does it touch down? To what time difference? I have everything booked for the next year, and need to know where I'm going - I can't pay for anything, get anything new or book anything else without that! And it had all the numbers in I need to call if anything happens! Are you going to be able to find Damian next time you need to? No! Because only three people alive have his permanent phone contact and you aren't one of them! So, even if I did have a way to talk to him, how would I explain to him that it's very likely some local, human, drunk, thug's gotten a hold of his number? Next time Apasia rings me - who's going to answer? Some random kid off of the street without anything better to do than steal! And then what do I tell her? If I ever do manage to

speak to her again? Can you tell me any of that, genius?"

"Chill, Liz," he repeated. "It's probably down at that pub you went to last night, isn't it? It's no big deal - just go back and get it. I doubt anything's happened to it since you left this morning."

"Yeah," I breathed, furious - although more with myself than him.

I'd have to go back. Not only did that bag have some makeup in which was very expensive - that I couldn't probably replace if I had to - it had my fake ID and everything. And when you're travelling almost constantly, ID is everything. Plus all of the phone numbers I'd managed to acquire over the years - and I needed to keep track of them. I'd have to go back and get it, but if I went back tonight, when Byron was playing, I could slip through the crowd, the place was always packed on Sunday nights.

No big deal. Or so I wished.

Brad

"Whoa, Luce - where did you get these?"

She smiled a little, pleased. "It's no big deal. A couple of slips of paper..."

"Tickets to the most exclusive band of all time, who sold out their local concert months ago is not nothing," I corrected her. "This must have been a fortune - and it's tonight - how did you manage that?"

"Gift from a friend," she shrugged. "I figured you'd get more out of them than me - I've never even heard of them. I was worried you'd be busy tonight, though."

I thought about it for a moment. "Yeah, I thought we were going to that place Alethea mentioned yesterday?"

"I...thought you'd prefer this," she said awkwardly. She turned to leave. "But, anyway, I'd better get going. Hope you like them, and-"

I grabbed her wrist, holding her back, shocked. "Whoa, girl. You're coming with me, right?"

At that, she smiled like I'd never seen before.

Kenneth

"You all set?" I asked her.

"Yeah," Alethea said distantly. "It's annoying though..."

"What is?" I asked instantly.

She looked up at the tone in my voice, smiling. "I hardly think that tonight's the best night to go out - it's going to be packed, and with this ankle...but, I guess it could be a whole lot worse."

I shook my head. "You'll be fine," I assured her. "What can go wrong?"

"A whole lot," she laughed.

I glanced over my shoulder when I heard a car rolling into the driveway. I looked back to see that she'd noticed it too. "Shall we get going?"

"Let's."

Alethea

"I still wish the others weren't busy," I muttered as Kenneth pulled me up the steps. He didn't say anything, his lips pulling up a little at the corners to a

knowing smile. "I can't believe they cancelled at the last minute..."

"Oh, stop moping," he told me, pushing open the door. "And just enjoy the night. I'm rather pleased they couldn't come, to be honest."

When we stepped inside, it was like a whole new world.

I could have sworn I'd been here before. I knew for a fact that I had been in this building before, but it seemed totally transformed after dark. It was much more busy, and the lights were dimmed for one thing. There were black drapes hung everywhere, and smoky lights trailing through the air. The noise pulsing from every side of the me was a mixture of both music and speech, although it all blended together in this atmosphere.

"Your parents do know you're going out, right?" Kenneth checked, smiling. "I can just imagine being sued over kidnapping for this."

I laughed. "They know I'm going out. They're not happy about it, but they know."

Lizzie

I glanced from side to side as I slipped in the back door. This reminded me so strongly of a few of the runs I'd been sent on it almost scared me, even though the predator in this case was only a human, not really a threat at all. Even so, he still scared me.

I recognised the atrocious sound blaring from the speakers as Byron's band - Janey's high, squeaky voice scratching across the top of it all. That meant he should be too preoccupied now to pay any attention to anyone around, especially me.

Even so, being the chicken that I was, I kept to the walls and the shadows as I moved around the room.

I searched everywhere. I looked all across the bar, above it, below it, around the room, everywhere I'd been last night and this morning. I even 'convinced' the security guard to let me through to see lost property so that I could be out of sight as fast as possible, but it wasn't there.

There was only one room left...

On my knees, I crouch before the music room's door. There was a chance that the keys were still outside, waiting for someone to pick them up, but I doubted it. I pulled a hair slide from my hair and started fiddling with the lock, pressing my ear to the door.

It clicked eventually, although it took quite a while - enough time for Byron's group to finish their song. Obviously, they'd been hard at work since I'd last heard them, this was a song I didn't recognise.

I froze, sensing someone behind me.

"If you'll excuse us a moment, I think the band needs a bit of a break..." There was a question in the words that were sent through the speakers, and that meant he didn't know for sure what was going on...and that meant something had happened quickly...

Hardly breathing, I turned on my knees to see Byron's towering form.

Alethea

Kenneth looked at me for a moment. "What's wrong?"

"It's all a bit...overwhelming," I said cautiously.

"Want to go outside?" he guessed.

I didn't even have to reply. It almost scared me how well he seemed to know me now. He moved through the crowd with such ease, it was hard to believe it was real. I stayed by his side, and was shocked when the chill of the evening air hit my bare skin.

He steered me away from all of the commotion and into the shadows out back. It was cold, but with his arm around me, I really didn't care. I let my eyes flick across the sky; it was almost misty - there wasn't many clouds, but the ones that were there were solid.

I looked back to him, noticing something I probably should have seen before. I smiled gently, looking down almost guiltily to try and hide it. He still noticed; I heard the smile in his voice. "What?"

"Nothing," I explained looking back up. "But I bet we look like a right pair - my leg in a cast and your arm all bound up. What on Earth did you do now?"

"Llewellyn," he explained, shrugging.

"Again?" I asked. I laughed. "He really doesn't like you, does he?"

He glanced away from a moment as the music changed inside. "I'll go get us some drinks, shall I?"

Kenneth

I heard Lizzie before I saw her.

"No, Byron - stop it!"

"What was that? What did you do earlier? Do you realise I was in that room for four hours before anyone could get me out? Those were the only cuts of those keys you bitch!"

"Ow - Byron, you're hurting me!"

"And where did you go anyway, huh? Did you grow wings and fly? 'Cos I certainly couldn't see another way out of that room!"

Maybe speed was a bad thing in a place like this - it would probably attract more attention than I'd like - but I wasn't wasting my time at human pace. Lizzie looked shocked when I leant against the wall to the side room, completely casual, as if I'd been there the

whole time. Byron looked around when she didn't take her weary eyes off of me.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"I want you to let go of her," I stated simply, glaring.

"Oh yeah?" he asked, squaring his shoulders. "And who are you to ask that? Why would I?"

"Because," I said sweetly, moving too fast for him to possibly see. I may have broken a few of his fingers when I prised his grip off of Lizzie, but it wasn't anything permanent...yet. I was back against the wall with my shocked sister beside me before he could react. "I said so."

"I'll knock your lights out!" he shouted.

"Oh, yeah? I'd best say goodnight then, hadn't I?"

Lizzie shook her head, whispering. "Don't, Kenneth - I can't-"

She cut off when he swung a fist at me.

I could see she didn't realise what she was doing - it was instinct alone that moved her. Tensing her body, Lizzie flexed her palm towards Byron. His eyes

glazed over a moment before they closed. It seemed like a long moment before Lizzie relaxed - and even once she did, he didn't open his eyes.

I almost felt sorry for him; he couldn't have known what was coming.

Lizzie smiled a little, relieved. "I don't think he's seen that side to night before..."

"It certainly can be terrifying," I agreed. I looked at her. "You know you should have done that a long time ago."

"I couldn't," she told me quietly. "He was just...I couldn't do it. Until then, anyway - I'm the only one who gets to hit you hard, and I don't usually bother."

"Sure, if you want to put it that way," I grinned, disappearing again.

Lizzie

I smiled to myself, hearing the announcement.

"I'm sorry folks, our band leader and main guitarist has had a bit of an accident...we all wish him well

soon so that he can get back up here and play - don't we folks?"

There was a slight murmur across the room.

"Not everyone," I breathed, laughing.

"So here's something a little different for you to listen to for a while - hope you like it. Now, it's a little old mind you, but choices are limited when it comes down to it."

I laughed when he neglected to note that their 'band leader' was also the only one with a key into their music room, which was currently locked and bolted. Those little links of metal had gone mysteriously missing earlier in the evening.

Kenneth appeared at my side for a moment as I turned away again. "You leaving already?"

I smiled a little. "Yeah, after all of that, I don't reckon hanging around is a good idea. Who knows...maybe I'll meet him again in a few years somewhere private when I can really mess him up."

He nodded knowingly. "I didn't think you let him get away so easily. But, saying that, I'd have hated to be on the receiving end of that earlier."

"Yeah...thanks for that."

He smirked. I swiped at him, but he disappeared into the crowd.

Alethea

"I'll make you a deal," he whispered in my ear, his breath brushing lightly against my skin.

My breathing caught for a moment, but I smothered it. "I'm not making any deals with you."

"Why's that?" Kenneth asked innocently, tracing his hand across my back in a distracting fashion.

I fought to control my heartbeat. "Because I know you. And I know I'll end up losing out."

Stood behind me, he rested his head on my shoulder. I smiled a little, looking up. My hair fell away from my neck, and I felt him smile as he kissed it gently. I just managed to smoother the heat rising to my

cheeks. After a moment, he looked up to, watching the moon in the sky.

"Isn't it beautiful?" I said, gazing up at the glowing orb, hung high in the darkness. His eyes stayed up for a little longer, but he looked back to me before long.

"I wouldn't say that," he told me quietly. "I've seen much prettier things in my time. One of them is stood right in front of me."

This time, I did blush.

I shivered a little as a breeze blew around us, feeling the goose-bumps raise on my arms. He frowned. "You're cold. We should go."

"But I don't want to go," I said simply.

He shook his head, chuckling. "I thought you didn't want to be here earlier?"

"A girl can change her mind."

He shrugged off his jacket and placed it around my shoulders. The weight of it surprised me a little, but it was thick and comfortable, keeping the wind off

without a problem. He turned me around in his arms and kissed me softly.

"You're mighty awkward, you know that?" he asked, pulling back a little.

"Oh be quiet," I said, pressing my lips to his again.

The music inside had changed. I much preferred this - it was a lot gentler than what had been playing before.

As the music floated gently out to us, I just let the moment last.

Close your eyes

Give me your hand darling

Do you feel my heart beating?

Do you understand?

Do you feel the same?

Am I only dreaming?

Or is this burning an eternal flame?

Chapter 11

Blood Stained Ruby Part 11

Hey - Part 11 has finally appeared outisde of my mind! With thanks to a number of people who kept me focused - Frankie, Beth (waggers14), MRS_SAL, Faith (funkymunky),-vinca-, and everyone else reading.

I'll apologise in advance for the ending, although the next part should be out reasonably soon, so hopefully the whole 'cliffhanger' thing won't be so bad.

Happy reading!

Jaelithe

A Need Too Far

Alethea

I yawned. Again.

Mum just gave me a strange look, glancing sceptically at me while I tried to keep my eyes open. I propped my head up on my hand, staring at my cereal rather than eating it. I knew it shouldn't be such a struggle to lift my spoon to my lips, but I was so exhausted that the knowledge didn't do much for me.

I was just on the brink of nodding off - part way through breakfast - when Charlie's screams pulled me back to full consciousness.

Mum glanced awkwardly up at the ceiling, clearly deciding between scolding me for being out so late or going upstairs to help Dad with my brother. I hoped she chose the latter - it spared me the lecture for now. Then again, the longer she left it, the worse it would be, but I did want her to go and check on Charlie. I really wanted to know what was wrong with him. Neither of my parents could work it out, and I hadn't been around enough to really see either. I felt insanely guilty about that - I'd make an effort when I came home from school.

Without another word, she stood and hurried from the room.

Charlie's fine, I told myself, trying to ignore the weight of my eyelids. He's just been having trouble sleeping. It's nothing to worry about.

Giving up on my cereal as a lost cause, I dumped what was left. My stomach growled angrily, so I shoved a few slices of bread into the toaster, hoping that my second attempt at a meal wouldn't taste like dust and cardboard. I couldn't even work out if it tasted that way or my senses were just too tired to acknowledge otherwise, but after getting impatient with the electronics - and aggravated at another yell from upstairs - I popped the toast up and slathered it in butter.

I didn't normally use so much, but I didn't really care right then. Maybe the whole going-out-on-a-Sunday-night thing hadn't been such a good idea after all. Especially since my parents wouldn't let me stay off.

"You'll have to get used to it sometime," Dad had told me. "You can't stay out late if it mucks up something important, and the sooner you learn that, the better."

Well, they weren't all too pleased with the time I got back. I phoned to say that I'd be late as soon as I realised how close to my curfew it was, but they still weren't exactly appreciative of the time I did get in.

I'd just trudged past them to bed. I hadn't been this tired last night, though, it was only since Dad had come into my bedroom as seven o'clock to threaten me with cold, icy water if I didn't get up soon. Being the idiot that I am, I'd responded with a challenge, sure that he wouldn't do it.

He didn't. He just yanked the blankets from my bed and tipped them over the bottom, before flicking on the extra-powerful, bright, central light hung from my ceiling as he left. He'd just grinned when I moaned, chuckling. And if I wasn't mistaken, the spring in his step hadn't been there when he'd entered my room either. Stupid Dads...they always wanted you to go to bed when you were wide awake, and get up when you were fast asleep - where was the justice?

The toast didn't taste as bad as my cereal had, and I managed to finish one of the slices before giving up on the second.

I looked at the clock on the wall as started moving slowly back to the stairs. They looked daunting. With a huge cast on my leg, it was no wonder I didn't want to go up them, but no I had the worry of losing my balance from lack of sleep as well. Closing my eyes from a moment and griping the banister firmly, I started to haul my way up.

Diana

My eyes were closed. I was low and as close to the ground as possible, and wriggling to get closer. I just wanted to get away from that noise.

"Hey, Di." I heard Alethea's soft voice and squirmed uncomfortably. She was close. I felt her hand on my head and rubbed against her a little, but was too disturbed to do much more.

I opened one eyes a smidgen to look up to her, but retreated, still away from the sound. She pulled her hand back and looked at me as if she knew what I

meant. Looking back down the stairs and then across to her brother's bedroom, she smiled sadly. When she moved away, I slipped past her and darted down the stairs.

As soon as she stepped through the door and into his room, the wails stopped.

Alethea

Charlie was on the floor in the centre of the room, Mum and Dad beside him, watching him with weary eyes. They were still no closer to working out what was wrong with him.

"Hey," I said to him, crossing the room and crouching down to curve my hand around his cheek. He closed his eyes and quietened for a moment, moving stubbornly towards my palm as I made to pull away. "Sorry, Charlie, I've got to go. I only came in to check on you."

I rubbed some of the fresh tears from his cheeks, still completely in the dark about what was wrong. I hugged him close for a moment and he hugged me back, which was more than Mum or Dad had been

getting from him. I felt terrible when I had to push him back. I stood again and he grabbed onto my leg. Any other day I probably would have laughed.

"I'll play with you later, 'k?" I told him, stroking back his curls from his face as Mum pulled him away from me. My chest tightened when he started to thrash again. Putting my hands over both of his when Mum lifted him up so that he couldn't grab at me again, I kissed him on the head. I looked at him for a moment before turning to Dad. "Are you sure I couldn't-"

"No," he interrupted simply. "School. You're not missing a day because you were out late - and Charlie'll be fine until you get back, he always has been before."

That didn't reassure me in the least.

I turned back again. "Mum-"

"No, Sweetie," she said softly, hugging Charlie close. She got no response. "It wouldn't be fair. And you have to go to school."

Letting my hands linger on Charlie's for a moment longer, I just kept my eyes on Mum's. After a moment,

I turned swiftly and left without glancing back. I picked my bag up smoothly from the floor, and heard the cries start again just before I shut the front door.

Kenneth

"You're grouchy in the morning," I noted jokingly.

She gave me a sideways glance, not amused. "So I don't do well when I don't sleep - sue me. Who are you to be Mr. Perky anyway?"

"Perky? Definitely not."

"That grin on your face says otherwise."

I thought about it for a moment. "I don't like it when you're moody. Are you actually trying to bite my head off?"

Something about the phrase made her stir, but she just snapped back. "Are you actually trying to break down all my nerves?"

Alethea wasn't very happy with me. I hadn't really thought about the whole sleep thing until I'd gotten home this morning, and even then it hadn't bothered me much. What I had somehow managed to neglect

was that humans tended to need more sleep than I'd left time for - it hadn't even occurred to me until I a few minutes before. It did explain the way Alethea was acting though, on the most part.

The explanation didn't quite fit the agitated edge to her step and stressed side to her expression, but I had it sussed for the most part. Whatever was bugging her would only annoy her more once she realised I could tell, so I kept my mouth shut. The journey to school was going to be a quiet one.

Although the grimace that she wore wasn't constant, it did return with a worrying regularity. I couldn't quite believe she was still walking to school to be honest - with that cast. I guessed she'd walked out before her parents could offer any different; she was that stubborn. Why she would do that when she was tired though, I had no idea. Unless she was just trying to prove a point. That was the sort of thing she'd do - ignore what she needed as long as everyone else thought she was ok.

I slipped a hand around her waist and she looked up to me.

"I don't want you collapsing on the way," I told her in response to her quizzical stare. She looked a little hurt, but I changed that quickly. "Or, at least, that's what you're parents are going to think seeing as we're still within view of your house."

She smiled and shook her head a little. "It won't matter - they're too preoccupied at the moment."

"And why's that? I don't imagine anything would be big enough to take the attention away from you - that doesn't seem possible. You're too perfect to ignore."

She smiled, blushing as she looked down. She shoved me away a little too, convinced I was joking, but I just stepped back into the same place as before. She frowned after a moment. "Charlie's not well."

"Shame," I muttered, although I wasn't really concerned. Kids like him were resilient - he'd be bouncing around and annoying everyone to death again by the time she got home. The only thing that bothered me was that I knew Alethea would be distracted all day because of it. At least she'd told me what was on her mind, without any probing on my side.

She seemed out of it for most of the trip. I put it down to lack of sleep more than anything else. I'd have to watch out for that in future - I might be able to do late nights and early mornings, but it didn't look as if Alethea was quite ready for that.

Lucy

Alethea stirred when the bell rang. I smiled when she blinked down at her book, still completely empty. She was incredibly lucky that we were sat at the back of class, otherwise she'd be in deep trouble. For once, I'd actually managed to keep my mind on the lesson; it was probably the knowledge that I wouldn't be able to simple use Alethea's notes from today. In fact, I felt rather smug to realise that she'd probably be using mine.

It wasn't that I like that she was exhausted, or that there was obviously something severe on her mind that kept plaguing her - far from it. I just wasn't used to the idea that people actually needed something that I'd done, and it felt good to know it would be helping them. Now I knew how Amber always used to feel.

Shoving my books in my bag, I looked up to her. "What are you even doing in today, A? You clearly aren't up to it..."

"Parents," she mumbled, sweeping her own thing off of the desk before the teacher could see how little she'd accomplished. "They seem to think that education's kind of important."

I laughed. "Same here. But they made you come?"

"Practically kicked me out of the house."

"Ouch."

"You're telling me," she said, standing. "Tonight, I reckon I'm going home and going to sleep, nothing else. But, knowing them, I'll get in and then they'll want me to be jumpy and cheery for something they've planned. Or they'll decide to go out for dinner and I'll get dragged into the whole affair."

"I know what you mean," I said sympathetically. "My mum always used to do that - she'd take me out somewhere in the evening and bring me back really late. Or early, depending on your point of view. And then Dad would get me up for school."

Her eyes widened a little as we trailed down the busy corridor to the canteen. She didn't notice the way that people watched her, but I did. I still didn't know why. They looked kind of shocked to see her with me; I was a little hurt.

"Didn't your mum ever think about school and things?"

I shook my head. "She doesn't care. I'm kind of on my own with that at the moment, the only help she's given me is investing in an alarm clock."

She was about to say something, but I cut across her.

"Well, she isn't usually at home in the mornings - she has to work." I decided to neglect telling her where she was when she wasn't working, which was the case more often than not. "Why didn't you just stay in bed, pull the covers around you and pretend to be sick?"

She shook her head. "I can't do that. I've been off loads in the past few weeks, and I don't think they'd believe it following a really late night. I tried to stay

in bed, but they know what I'm like when I don't sleep."

"Lack of sleep can give you headaches," I recited helpfully. She murmured in agreement, probably unable to think of a response to that. Her eyes started scanning the room for some seats. "How did they get you up? My dad always favoured the turn-the-radio-on-really-loud-so-that-you-can't-get-back-to-sleep method."

She laughed. "Nah - Dad just turned the light on and put everything I could use to block it out away from me and out of reach. But Charlie took over the noise part after that. Dad enjoyed forcing me up."

"I had that - my dad always found the whole thing rather entertaining to be honest. I don't think I ever had a morning like that without his grin and his smug chuckle invading the atmosphere."

She nodded a little, resting her head on her hand as we sat down.

"You know what you should have done?" I asked her, digging in to my lunch. She shook her head a little.

"You should have told them that you'd be better off at home. If you a miss a day of school, you can catch up and no-one thinks anything of it, and so you'll be fine - but if you were there and you can't remember everything, it puts loads of people off of helping you. Trust me, I know. Not that I'd do that. And besides, if you were at home resting today, you'd be able to concentrate tomorrow rather than being sleepy again. I mean, doesn't that make sense? If you don't stay off, you'll stay kind of sleepy for three of four days, so your performance is going to be bad, whereas if you stay off for one day, you can catch up on that and then you're all set for the next lot and can actually pay attention. Do you get what I mean?"

"Uh-huh," she said weakly, nodding her head a little. "I'll try that tomorrow."

"And, A?" I said. She opened her eyes a little. "Don't fall asleep in your lunch - that's something I know about as well, and let me tell you..."

I had a nudging feeling on the back of my mind as I talked, but I couldn't work out why. I thought there was something I was forgetting. I really hated that

feeling - where on Earth was the point in feeling like you don't know something when you have no idea what it is, so for all you know, you could remember it anyway and your mind's just playing tricks on you?

I looked at her for a moment, considering. "Late nights really don't suit you, do they?"

"No kidding," she mumbled, pushing her food away and folding her arms on the table.

"Oh god - I've got to go!" I exclaimed, standing when I glanced at my watch. I grabbed my bag from the floor and slung it over my shoulder, racing for the door. I ignored the stares as I ran, more than used to it. Please, please, please don't let this be the time that I fall over my own feet.

I sprinted down the corridor and wheeled around the corner, slamming straight into someone. I staggered back a bit and he caught me before I could fall. I looked up to him.

"You alright?"

I smiled, relieved when I realised we were the only ones in the corridor. At least I knew that that

spectacle wouldn't be running all over school - I was getting used to the speed of rumours in this place. "Yeah - thanks. And thanks again for the tickets too. Last night was great."

He shrugged it off. Then his gaze turned quizzical, almost assessing. His eyes scraped up and down me as if he was looking for something. I stepped back, shocked by the strength of it. He stepped with me, and I was dismayed to feel how close the wall was when I attempted to move back. His eyes returned to mine.

"Are you alright?" I asked, noting a strange tinge to them that I hadn't seen before. It took him a moment to reply.

"Perfect."

There was something about his voice, too.

Startled when my phone started to beep and vibrate in my pocket, I jumped, pulling it out and looking at the screen. I was relieved to have an excuse to get away from his gaze if I was perfectly honest, but my heart started its sprint again as soon as I read the

alarm. I was really, really late now - that should have gone off fifteen minutes ago! Stupid thing - I forgot to reset the clock!

I glanced up to see that look in his eyes still there. I moved a little, practically sliding along the wall for the first few paces to give him as wide a berth as possible. "I've got to go - I'll see you tomorrow."

He blinked and the look was gone. He stepped back, away from me, a hint of a smile taking over his lips. "Of course."

Thankful that whatever had just happened was past, I turned away, moving a little slower than before but still reasonably fast. I said one last thing over my shoulder as I hurried away.

"Thanks again, Kenneth."

Alethea

I looked up when Lucy dashed off, curious. Then I glanced across the room at Brad, having just come through the other door. Was I really so out of it that I'd missed something going on between them? It could be coincidence, but things had been rocky

between them the last time I'd checked that I couldn't be sure - although that, admittedly, hadn't been for a while.

"Hey," whispered a voice in my ear.

I jumped a little, turning; Kenneth was grinning behind me - I could have sworn he wasn't there a second before. I smiled. "Hi. Where have you been hiding al day, then? I was under the impression that you were actually in my fourth lesson?"

He just shrugged, pulling the seat behind me out and dropping down into it. "You don't need me there. I had something to do."

I raised an eyebrow, but decided not to comment.

"So you haven't fallen asleep in class yet?" he joked, smirking.

I narrowed my eyes. "No, I haven't - and I don't appreciate that comment. I don't understand how you can not be tired, either."

He shrugged it off. "Ever heard practise makes perfect?"

That was another comment that I didn't think required a reply.

Brad

I sunk into my seat. Had she even glanced at me?

I thought last night had been alright. I mean, sure, I still hadn't told her anything she didn't already know about Alethea and all, but she'd seemed so over it. Last night had fine - she hadn't exactly seemed like the concert type to me, but she fitted right in. So what was that about? Some false voice in my mind whispered that it could just be coincidence, but I blocked it out. What had I done to upset Lucy now? I thought I'd made it all up to her.

My appetite was minimal so I barely picked at my food. Mark was babbling about something ridiculous, as usual, so no-one gave me a second glance.

My vague gaze wandered over to Alethea, seeing as she was in the spot that Lucy had just vacated, and my thoughts took a completely new angle. She fought a smile at something, the corners of her lips pulling up a bit, despite how much she was trying to stop it.

After a moment she simply laughed, making her companion smile in reply.

I really didn't know what to think of him anymore. The raging argument in my mind was enough to keep me up at night. I didn't like to say it, but this really looked like something that might be more than a few week spell. It'd been almost a month. Three and a half weeks. I might actually be ok with it if I didn't have Miranda's expression in my mind every time his name came up.

No, my mind snapped. I wouldn't. He'd done the same thing over and over - there was no reason for this to be any different.

But Alethea had sounded so sure - and she was so content with him. She knew what a risk he was, and she was barely ever wrong. She'd always had a good sense of character, and if she believed she'd be ok, I was tempted to think so too. I just couldn't do it. I wouldn't believe he'd changed - not just like that.

But I couldn't see what he was gaining from this either.

Alethea

After school Kenneth disappeared for a while again. I didn't want to stay in the house, so we'd ended up agreeing to meet at the park before going back to his house. I didn't know what it was, but I really didn't think I could manage a whole evening inside - not least in the place I ended up staying most of the time anyway. I just needed to get out.

Feeling so trapped was a new thing for me. When the bell had rung at the end of school, I'd just been waking up - finally arousing from the stupor I'd been in all day, so now I was wide awake. If I had the option of going to sleep, I knew I'd probably manage it and be out for hours, but it didn't feel like such an impossible feat to stay awake any more. I wasn't entirely sure whether that would stop me sleeping when I eventually crawled back to my bed, but decided to face that barrier when I got there.

I'd only been in the house for ten minutes - and was just about to leave again in fact - when Mum bustled in. She was hording a vast amount of plastic bags as she shuffled her way through to the kitchen and was

adamant that I didn't see what was inside. She also looked very shocked to see me - as if she hadn't expected anyone to be home. I just pressed myself against the wall and slipped past her.

I'd made sure to grab my phone before I left, shoving it in my bag. Part of me wanted to sprint down the drive, although another part - probably the logical one if I was truthful - knew I shouldn't. Throwing my drawstring bag across my back as I turned the corner, I tried to work out why I had so much adrenaline pumping through me. Sports had never had much of an appeal to me, although, I reasoned, not being able to do them did limit me.

I was shocked when I wandered - somewhat - casually around the corner to see Kenneth already waiting for me. Still dressed in what he'd been wearing to school, he didn't look as if he had a care in the world. I was almost tempted just to stay where I was and watch him for a while, just because he looked so content. I probably would have too, if his eyes hadn't settled on me at that moment.

Diana

Susan ran back out the second Alethea was gone, grabbing more back from the car and stuffing them beneath the sink. Without a glance in my direction, she pulled the empty cigarette packets out of the small space and slammed the door closed, turning to hurry back to her car. I should have guessed. She'd have to dispose of the empty boxes somewhere else, less anyone noticed.

Maybe it was just those premonitions acting up, but I really didn't think that keeping this as a secret for much longer could be a good thing.

Kenneth

"Why don't we just stay outside?" she suggested, looking up at the sky. I glanced up too. There weren't any clouds about...

"We could if you want," I allowed, surprised. Alethea didn't really seem like an outdoor kind of girl to me. She smiled. I kept to myself that I'd rather not - the sun irritated me. I guessed I'd just have to manoeuvre us towards the shade soon, although she'd probably object to that. It was rather cold, after

all. I didn't think I had a good enough reason to get out of the light just yet. "But are you sure we should?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Your parents won't be too pleased - you're meant to stay inside and not strain your leg."

"Since when did you become a doctor?" she retorted, defensive.

"That's beside the point - do you really think it's a good idea? I certainly don't."

She pretended not to hear me.

Her gaze focused over my shoulder and she smiled at the kids I knew were playing over there. Annoying little things. Something else slipped onto her expression after a moment.

"He'll be fine," I assured her, putting an arm around her shoulders. I could last a little while. "Kids bounce back - you know that. Your brother's going to be up and running again by the time you get back tonight. I'm guessing he wasn't there when you got home?"

"No," she said slowly. "But how did you know?"

I shrugged. "There's never anyone in your house nowadays. Besides, I saw your car head in the opposite direction on my little... venture before I came here."

"You actually went somewhere?" she checked. "You must have been super fast - I was practically running on my way here, and you still beat me."

"That eager to see me?" I teased. She bit back her response. "I didn't realise you wanted a race."

"Right now, I'd been happy to run a marathon if it got this thing off of me," she said, gesturing. "I hate staying still."

I looked at her for a moment. "You seem to do just fine when someone plants a book in your hands."

She shrugged. "But then I end up practically sprinting everywhere afterwards. I'm actually dreading how much energy I'm going to have stored up by the weekend."

"At least sit down?" I suggested.

She looked at the empty bench a few paces away. "Fine," she grumbled. "But only because it'll get you to stop nagging."

Harry

"Come on, Champ," I pleaded, glancing back at him in the mirror. "Just close your eyes. You'll feel better after a good, long nap - you'll see."

Charlie blinked a few times, but didn't stop struggling. Sighing, I lurched the car around and into the drive, accepting that this was a pointless effort. When I got out of the car, I breathed deeply. We'd been driving around for hours to no avail, and as much as I resented feeling this way, it was a relief to have Charlie in the car with his wails blocked off for just a few seconds.

I trudged around the car and opened his door, bending in to scoop him out. I hit the door shut, pressing the button to lock the car. I bounced him a bit in my arms.

"Come on, Champ - I'm sure Allie never made this much of a fuss," I told him, walking to the door. I dug

through my pockets for the keys. "What's gotten in to you, eh?"

It took some time, but I eventually managed to get into the house. I put Charlie in the lounge, heading through to the kitchen to get him something to eat. Maybe that would calm him down. Diana looked up when I came in, her tail swishing. I noticed her empty food bowl.

"You've had no food either?" I guessed. "Neither of my girls thought to feed you?"

I swiped it form the ground. This was getting ridiculous. If Charlie didn't clam down by the weekend, I'd take him up to the doctor's for a check-up. I couldn't think of anything that might be bothering him so much, nothing had changed lately.

And just where the hell was Susan?

Kenneth

"I want to go," Alethea finally decided.

I laughed, standing, although I was relieved. "And why's that?"

"I don't like be outside, where I should be moving, and having to sit still - and with you around, I'm not going to get to do much more, I can tell."

A movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention and I turned my head away, curious. Behind me, I heard Alethea slip slightly, and I whipped back around, catching her when her feet lost their grip.

She laughed when I caught her. The expression on my face must have said she was mad. Clinging to me, she straightened up, sighing a little. "It's a good job you managed that - my parents would murder me if anything else happened to me. They know how hyper I can get, and I don't think they could deal with another broken bone."

We stayed silent for a moment, my eyes scanning her face.

"You know, I think I've changed my mind," I told her. She looked at me. "If you being moody in the morning means you'll be this cheery in the afternoon, I really don't mind it after all."

"Oh, really?" she joked, raising an eyebrow.

I smiled. Whatever was going on in her head today, it made her more confident as well.

As we made our way away, my eyes scanned the crowd. I was glad to see that she was still wearing the ruby, but I hadn't quite pin-pointed the cause of the motion that had captured my attention, Alethea's slip diverting me before I could find it.

Cameo wouldn't be here. She was still wearing the necklace, so he wouldn't be able to find her. But that didn't completely stop it - it had been known to happen, after all.

But it wasn't him that I saw watching us, hidden just within the shadows of the trees - it was a different figure. The way his eyes were following the two of us had the same protective tint to them that Cameo's always had, but it was different. This was loyalty. His was always the complete opposite.

I didn't know quite what I thought of the boy stood across the park from us. Before this, I'd just considered him a nuisance if he ever entered my

thoughts at all, but now that my expression probably echoed the same things as his - protection, safety, care - when regarding the girl beside me, so I wasn't really sure I could think of him that way from much longer.

I nodded a little in his direction.

Brad

She was still smiling. She looked so pleased, so happy. Again.

It was getting beyond what I'd thought this was capable of. Not only had it been going on for far too long, there wasn't as worry in her mind when she looked at him. She'd been upset about something all day - worried - even I'd seen that. It was clear from a distance, but when he came into the picture, that almost seemed to melt away.

I didn't think she'd been like that with anyone before. Sure, when Miranda had still been with us she'd always been able to make her forget what was going on and calm her down, cheer her up, but it was

never this instant that way. Kenneth was something new to her.

His eyes connected to mine just before they turned away, and I saw him tilt his head slightly in my direction. He knew I was watching them, and he didn't seem put out by it. It was almost as though he expected it.

And Alethea didn't exactly seem possessed - it wasn't like it had been with Miranda; she still managed to get a sentence out when she was around him. In fact, it was getting to the point where she was treating him just like any other guy. Just another friend. More than that, if I was truthful, but she clearly didn't see him as the threat he'd always posed before, and it didn't look like he saw her as another tool. Not anymore.

Alethea

"Hey, Charlie," I whispered, slipping into his room before school. "How are you doing today?"

I wasn't really supposed to be up here. Dad had jumped me almost as soon as I was out of my

bedroom, forbidding me from coming in here. Charlie was finally getting some rest, and he didn't want anything to interrupt it. I wasn't going to do anything - just hover in the doorway and say goodbye before I left for school.

I probably should have been happy that he was asleep - but it sounded so pained that I simply couldn't manage it. Each breath was heavy; you could almost hear the air scratching at his dry throat on its way to his lungs. Glancing swiftly down the corridor to check that Dad wasn't watching me, I moved further into the room.

"Charlie," I sighed, crouching beside him. I started whispering to him, somehow inside the delusion that he'd be able to hear me. "You feel better soon, alright? We're all worried about you right now - you just get better."

I straightened up. After a moment, I bent over him to kiss the side of his head lightly. He barely stirred. I backed out of the room, my thoughts troubled by the weight of his breaths. Even as I walked away, I could hear them, strong, sure and painful in the air.

And after a moment, it stopped completely.

Harry

"Dad? Dad!"

I shot up from the table. Whatever she was yelling about had better be good - hadn't I already told her to keep quiet today?

"Dad!"

"What, Allie?" I called. My voice sounded irritated and gruff - I was attempting to make it carry without being too loud. She didn't reply so I forced myself up the stairs. She was going to be late if she didn't leave soon, too. "Allie?"

"In here, Dad."

"What? I told you-"

I cut off when I saw the worry on her face. I completely froze when I saw what the worry was for; Charlie's eyes were closed, and although he was still getting air in, it was pained and cut out every so often. I didn't know how much longer it would keep starting again though.

"Go to school," I ordered roughly, darting down the stairs to grab the phone from the side. I was dialling before I'd even turned around, dashing back to them. Once I'd raced into the room I didn't want to take me eyes off of him. When I didn't hear any movement behind me I rounded on her. "Now - Alethea!"

She stared at me for a moment. "You - what? You just want me to go? But-"

"But nothing," I snapped quickly, speeding the phone to my ear. "School is school - go."

Curing under my breath when the call failed to connect, I closed my eyes as the voice echoing from the phone informed me I'd have to dial again. Of all the blasted times...

I punched the numbers into the phone at full speed.

"Allie!"

"But, Dad-"

"Alethea!" I shouted. "Out - now!"

"Come on, Champ," I said, putting my hand on his cheek as he struggled. "Hold on there."

Kenneth

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she answered, still agitated. Her eyes kept jumping to the door, and every time someone walked past, she'd freeze, anticipating their movements. When someone actually came into the classroom, something completely new took over her expression. They laid something on the desk for our teacher, who had - suspiciously - vanished for the last half hour. Her eyes didn't move from it.

I glanced from the reception note to her, completely baffled. "What's wrong?"

This time I didn't get a reply.

I sighed, standing. Alethea still didn't glance at me. Her eyes only strayed from the pink slip of paper when I walked straight up to the desk and looked obviously at it. Huh. I didn't know they circulated notes like that - what unlucky guy had to be escorted to his detention after school? I looked at the name. No-one I knew - not that that said much.

She was watching me with wild eyes when I made my way back up the aisle. She gripped my arm as soon as I dropped into my seat, hard. "What did it say?"

I gave her an odd look. "That some guy's got an after-school tonight - why do you care?"

She looked down, although didn't move her hands away. In fact, their grip tightened. Everyone else in the room was either working or deep in their own conversations - there was just enough noise that they wouldn't be able to easily hear us either.

Taking her chin in my hand, I steered her gaze towards mine, saying, "What's the matter? What aren't you telling me?"

I thought about it for a moment.

"And while I'm asking questions - why were you outside so early this morning anyway?"

She bit her lip and looked down.

Alethea

I could have said - I probably should have, too, but I doubted that Kenneth would be interested. The last word that I'd heard between Dad's lips this morning was 'ambulance' - I'd hung back a bit but he still kicked me out.

My stomach was still twisting - and it felt as though my head was going to implode. I wanted to know that Charlie was alright, but until I got some kind of note from Dad, I couldn't be sure. And I'd had my phone confiscated during first lesson because it had been on. I tried to tell the teacher that I'd 'forgotten' to turn it off, but she didn't believe me. Maybe there was a ring of truth to this thing about me, lying and the impossibility of the two. So I needed some kind of recognition from reception - a note, a call, a message, anything. I'd have done anything to know exactly what was going on.

Dad could have sent me a text or something to tell me what was going on - but now I wouldn't know until three o'clock. I thought I was going to sick from it all. But I couldn't be. I just clamped my arm across my stomach and tried not to think about my breakfast -

the last thing my parents needed was their daughter throwing up while my brother could be going through so much worse.

I needed that phone back. I needed some sign - some message!

I wasn't going to go and see the nurse - she'd phone Mum, and that wasn't going to help anything. My head was spinning furiously. I just didn't know if he'd be ok.

And even if he was - I might not find out until tonight. My dad was just the sort of person who'd know the news for himself and assume everything was alright, completely forgetting that I was having a panic attack at school. He'd probably have something tugging on the back of his mind that told him he needed to do something, but wouldn't remember what it was. So I'd just end up forgotten.

But for now, Kenneth had me looking at him. He was scrutinising my expression, although I couldn't tell what he saw. Worry. Fear. Indecision.

"You look pale," he told me carefully.

I looked at him for a moment. The worry echoed in his eyes was nothing but sincere, but I couldn't tell him. I didn't know what he'd say, but the last thing I wanted from anyone right now was pity and concern. A little comfort? Sure. But anything else was going too far.

"I'm fine," I said briskly, turning back to my work.

I tried to ignore the shakes of my hand as I wrote, although I'm sure Kenneth picked up on them.

Lucy

"What's on your mind now, girl? You haven't been yourself today," I asked bluntly. PE was one of my best lessons, save the few times I stumbled. It wasn't often, but it was regular enough - anyone who could find a sport that I hadn't fallen over in was simply amazing in my book.

Seeing that - once again - she was in her own little world and wasn't going to move for the ball that was heading straight for her, I dived valiantly across half of the court to return it - whilst maintaining a very

satisfactory balance and upright position, I might add.

"Alethea! That's the fifth time in the last three minutes!"

"Huh?"

I looked at her. After a moment, I rolled my eyes. "You can be as smug as you want on that little bench of yours, and yes - I know they don't have the best aim, but seeing as the ball is practically drawn to you every other time it comes over the net, will you do me a favour and at least watch it so that it doesn't hit you? Before I break something?"

"Yeah, sure, sorry," she mumbled.

"You were jumping in your seat in Chemistry this morning, A, what happened? You could barely stay still when we were stuck behind a desk, but as soon as we get to the lesson where we're allowed to move, you act like stone!"

She looked at me. "I can hardly do much, though, can I?"

I looked at her for a moment. She didn't notice. From the vague traces in her voice I could guess that her feeble attempt had been intended as a joke, but there was no humour at all in her tone. Her eyes were flicking across the playing ground, resting for one moment on the open gate that led to the road while she analysed the cars going past, and then another one out motionless teacher, leaning against the wall further from us.

I glanced up from a moment, gesturing to the other on the court. "Guys! Can you do two v. one for a minute? I need a break."

There were weak mumbled of agreement, so I raced over to Alethea and sat down beside her. She glanced at me, but her quick eyes returned almost instantly to their new routine.

"Alethea," I said slowly. I waited for her to look at me before I spoke, and I took her hand, holding her gaze. "What's wrong? Can you please tell me? I'm worried, A."

She chewed on the inside of her cheek, clearly debating. After a moment, there were tears in her eyes. She looked down, blinking them furiously away.

"A? Come on..."

She turned her head a little away from me. I waited, sensing that she was going to say something. "It's nothing - I just... Charlie..."

Somewhere across the ground, the bell rang, signalling the end of school. We didn't stir. And I let her tell me all about it.

Kenneth

"No, Kenneth, I've got to go."

"Why? What's-"

Alethea just shook her head, grabbing her jacket from the side. "Nothing - I've just got to go."

I grabbed her arm, stopping her where she was. "Why? What happened? I thought you said it was only your dad?"

"It was," she said, trying - and failing - to shake my hand off.

"So what did he say?" I asked quickly. A two minute phone call couldn't have been that serious, surely?

She tried to pull away again, her features twisting in pain when I didn't let go. "That I have to go - please, Kenneth-"

My hand had dropped from her arm the second that look had appeared on her face. Without understanding the reason behind it, she stepped back slowly, weary of my reaction. When I didn't move any further - my eyes only scanning her expression - she turned and ran from the room.

I stared after her.

I'd already lost her after school - she'd been almost half an hour late. I had no idea how she could be, but I didn't notice the time at first. Sure, I guessed I saw the hallways getting slowly emptier, but my mind was still revolving around whatever had been on her mind that morning. I was so out of it that I didn't really notice anything until she skidded to a halt in front of me, having sprinted most of the way - and even then I was no closer to a conclusion than I'd been to begin with.

She told me that she'd had to collect her phone, which may have been true, but when I asked her what else she'd done, she fell silent again. The second we'd passed the school gate, she'd had her phone out and in her hand, searching through the messages. When it flashed at her, she'd almost panicked, although apparently she recognised the number because she calmed down again and didn't read it. It was like she was waiting for something.

She'd been in a hurry to get home and for the first time I'd seen she seemed disappointed when there was no-one else in the house. I might even go as far as to say she looked worried by it. While she'd changed, I'd left. Usually, she takes quite a while to get out of her uniform and choose what to wear, so I thought I'd had time. Even so, I'd been a quick as possible - I'd rather be with her than away doing something else, and rather have her conscious, hence the reason for the trip. So I was shocked when I got back with less than a second to spare before she got to the lounge.

Because she'd looked so worried, I'd suggested coming here. She'd seemed reluctant at first - anxious to be away from the house for some bizarre reason - but I'd persuaded her. Once she was inside the house and away from Llewellyn's barks, she was calmer. And then, after only another hour, her phone had rung.

And now she was running out on me.

Alethea

Mum picked me up from the end of Kenneth's road. She disapproved of me being out with this cast on in general, without thinking about me rushing anywhere. The journey to the hospital was silent, which gave me lots of time to think - not something I was too pleased about at this moment in time.

Thank God, Lucy - if you hadn't known those tricks with the makeup...

Kenneth had been deep in thought when I'd eventually caught up to him, and as we hadn't yet had an argument about the red rings that had been around my eyes before we left school, I assumed that

Lucy's magic had worked. She never really struck me as the makeup type, but she was my saviour when it came down to it. Admittedly, we had argued over almost every other subject available since then, but my tears hadn't been on the list.

I'd been so jumpy the whole day. It wasn't something that he'd just avoided - once I had met up with him after school, I'd been bombarded with questions. All of which I'd avoided. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but something inside me just really didn't want him to know. It wasn't that he shouldn't know, or that I didn't trust him, but...

Well - but what?

I pondered that the whole way to the hospital, and by the time we walked into the ward to see my brother, I'd been over the whole argument countless times. But that didn't mean I had an answer.

Charlie was alright.

The thoughts still completely numbed my mind - after all the panic and the worry, and he was alright. And I'd been right - Mum hadn't known until Charlie

had been in here for three hours, and they 'hadn't noticed how late it was' until Dad phoned me. Any other time, I'd have assumed they were just faking that - but I'd had it all day. I'd sit down to a lesson, and it would either go so slow that I could've sworn I'd aged a lifetime in the process, or it went so fast that I'd barely touched the seat before I was being ushered from the room.

I looked at Charlie, sleeping soundly for the first time in weeks. He looked so peaceful.

Mum and Dad were at his bedside, watching him, leaving me the seat beside the window. He had his own room. It was odd, I thought, someone so small having such a large space.

My eyes wandered across the room. There were pin-ups on the wall, everything from phone numbers to menus. There were dates, times, names, information, everything. And on one wall there was a bookshelf. It was lacking in anything of interest, but I guessed that at eight years old, I'd have been glad to read any of them. Right now, my mind wouldn't connect one word to the next to string an understandable

sentence together when I read it. There were a few buttons and monitors too, although I was glad to recognise that none of them were being used.

There was a television in the corner too. For the brief time that Dad had popped down the corridor and Mum had slipped off to the loo, leaving me alone with my brother, I'd walked over and kissed his sleeping form lightly on the head, as I'd done that morning, and looked up at it, teasing, "What a lucky boy..."

At least when I was saying things like that I could pretend that he was still listening. At the moment, he was asleep - having had practically no shut-eye over the past few weeks, it was a fair break for him. He was alright.

Now that they were back and murmuring quietly to each other, it was hard not to notice the worry lines etched on their faces. I'd been seeing so little of them lately that I simply hadn't hit just how much Charlie's 'illness' had been bothering them. My eyes scraped the room again, looking for an escape from the near-constant twists of my stomach.

When they eventually settled, I saw a bag hung on the wall. It was simple cloth, and an easy drawstring back - much like my old PE bag from Junior school. From the top of the bag I could see cords and tubes - all leading to various mechanisms and controllers on the wall, some of them even vanishing straight through the brick. I shivered.

But, an optimistic voice in my mind piped up, being unhelpfully cheery as it did so. At least he's not using any of them.

I couldn't argue with that.

I wanted to think about Charlie - it felt fickle to be so close to him after such an ordeal and just ignore it all - but I didn't want to think about him either. I didn't know what had happened, and I wouldn't know until the doctor arrived, so thinking about everything that had been running through my mind all day - everything that could have happened - was pointless. She was meant to be here a few hours ago, supposedly.

So I decided to go with my instinct and think about something else. There was no use in reliving the

worry that had been suffocating me through school, so I pushed it to the back of my mind and hoped it would calm down. Still, there was only one subject that really held my concentration long enough to do me any good.

I didn't know what Kenneth was doing right now. Probably thinking about who he was going to go to next. I didn't want to believe that he'd leave me - and although I knew that he felt something more for me than he usually did for his girls, it was still a possibility - but even if I stayed with him, I didn't know what he was doing about the blood. Yesterday, he'd obviously gotten his fill before he met me at the park, as fast as that was. Maybe he'd keep doing that. In all truthfulness, I hadn't been paying enough attention to realise what was happening today - part of the reason that I'd rushed out for fast was that I was worried about falling 'asleep' when I had no idea what was going on and missing something important. If I kept it up, he'd have to move on.

I didn't want to think about that. I wouldn't.

So who was he going to if he kept disappearing? He'd always waited around for me to wake up, but clearly he wasn't doing that for whoever this was... and that was if it was only one person. I supposed it would make more sense that he left - if they didn't remember what had happened and he wasn't there they wouldn't have any reason to suspect anything at all afterwards. I wasn't exactly glad that the reason he had been staying with me was blood, but... but...

But I couldn't help thinking - despite knowing it was stupid - what I'd done wrong.

What had changed his mind? It wasn't even as if I'd done anything, but I suddenly wasn't good enough for him. The fact that he hadn't actually left me yet made me feel great - to know that now, at least, he was staying because he wanted too - but it still felt like there was something I could have done to hold onto him. Obviously, there were better people out there than me.

My attention snapped back to the room around me when the doctor entered the room. She had a tired look about her - clearly, there was a lot going on. She

had a few younger workers with her, just trainees, I would guess. My gaze flicked back out of the window, and I saw the first few raindrops falling silently from the sky.

I didn't mean to zone out - but now that I knew everything was ok, I just wanted to get away from here. I wanted to be at home and put this behind us, as if it had never happened. I didn't need all the details - they'd already said he was alright. Sure, I wanted to know what was wrong, but they were talking in such a calm, relaxed way that I couldn't concentrate. Wasn't there even a trace of the worry that had seized everyone this morning left? Or was I alone in that thought?

At the mention of 'blood', I looked up instantly.

Amos

"Alright," I said wearily, looking around and wondering about the strained atmosphere that was hovering in the air. "What happened?"

"I couldn't tell you," Kenneth replied, not looking up to me. His expression was set in a deep frown, his

eyebrows furrowed above his narrowed eyes as he glared at the ground, his head tilted forward in defeat.

"That doesn't help me much, mate," I told him.

He looked up at me, cold, hard ice in his eyes. "Well then, you know exactly how I feel."

"Alright," I said slowly. "So what are you thinking about that's gotten you all wound up? No - let me guess. Al-"

"Alethea," he interrupted.

I shook my head a little, still thinking about it. "I still think the name's odd - there's so many better things that would suit her..."

He glared at me.

"Ok - forget it," I said, holding my hands up in surrender. I'd just have to come back to it later. "So tell me what happened - everything from start to finish."

Kenneth looked at me for a moment. He hated doing this - he always had. Since he was tiny I'd always

coaxed him into telling me things that bugged him, and as far as I knew, it always helped. He'd never like having to admit to it all, but I could usually give him a solution or two to calm him down. When I didn't say anything I began to wonder whether he'd outgrown it. Maybe he really wouldn't tell me anything.

I waited.

After a short while, I gave up, maybe I was in over my head expecting him to open up to me - it wasn't as if he was a kid any more, after all. I turned away. I was halfway out the door before he stopped me. I glanced back over my shoulder, but didn't really expect anything. He could fight his own battles anyway.

And then, he took a deep breath and started to explain.

Alethea

I looked across the room at Mum and Dad, conversing with the doctor. They were speaking in slow, nervous voices, being careful to keep it quiet so

that I couldn't hear. But I already knew enough. Right now they were only finalising the details; I'd already heard the bulk of the conversation before.

Diabetes.

Charlie's blood sugar wasn't regulated - that meant that there was often either too much sugar, or not enough sugar in his bloodstream. He needed the sugar, and without proper attention he could...

Well, it all meant that he'd need proper attention.

And that meant he'd have to prick his finger regularly for a blood test.

And that meant there was no way I was letting Kenneth anywhere near my house again.

Alethea

It occurred to me later that I'd have to keep the whole thing from him. If he knew about the blood tests and how regular they'd be, it could only complicate things, in more ways than one. He'd want to know why I was so put out by that, while trying to make it seem as though it was no big deal, and that

was if he stayed after that - I didn't want to give him another incentive to leave.

Brad

Watching the two of them across the hall, it was difficult to make my mind up. Having been with Alethea most of the day, I could tell how stressed she was. Or rather, she had been - she seemed fine now. It was as if I was watching a perfect slice of normality - as if none of this other junk was going on.

Neither her nor Kenneth even glanced in my direction, although I had an uncomfortable feeling that he could sense my gaze.

It was doing my head in. I didn't want to see what was happening - it had been just the same with Miranda, and he'd left in almost a second. Although, I supposed, she'd already been infatuated with him to begin with. Surely, if Alethea was being so much of a bother to say that she didn't want him, he'd have left by now?

She wasn't putting up much of a fight no though. Maybe he was waiting for that. He was waiting for them to get their guard down, and then - and then...

But that didn't seem right. I knew I wasn't imagining the shadows in his eyes when he looked at her, the ones foreign to his features, the ones that told me that he actually did care what happened to her. I didn't want to believe them, but no matter what else was going on, I did have to admit that that had never been there before.

Lucy walked up and stopped beside me, although it took a moment for my gaze to switch to her. It was just the way that Alethea was smiling - I was trying to work out how he could possibly have managed that when she'd been so tense all day.

"Hey, Luce," I said, smiling.

She glanced at Alethea and Kenneth, following where my gaze had been only a moment before. Her eyes returned quickly to mine, trying to work out what I made of it all now. She looked shocked when I met her with a calm stare. I offered her my arm, which she took, a little gingerly.

"We'd better get going - don't want to be late," I said simply, smiling.

Her eyes flicked away from mine for a moment, down to the ground before leaping across to the other two. When she met my gaze again, she seemed a little calmer, although still unsure. "Yeah...we'd better."

I glanced back as we walked away.

I guessed...in a way...he was good for her.

Kenneth

"Ok...let's go back to your-"

"No," she said quickly, shooting me a panicked glance. "No, not my house."

Dammit.

I'd finally gotten her out of her shell, made her laugh - somehow - and in one sentence I'd put the strain back on her expression. I was a total idiot. "Alright," I said softly, reacting to her sudden change in mood and trying to revert the conversation back to where it had been before. "So where do you want to go?"

"Yours?" she suggested hopefully, looking for any reason to avoid her house. Strange girl. She hadn't wanted to be away from it yesterday. She glanced at me, only to look away when she saw that I was watching her.

"Alright," I agreed slowly.

My mind delved into the same thoughts that had entranced it so deeply yesterday, following the same paths and twists that it had before, and reaching no better answers. We were way out of school before I spoke - I hadn't even noticed us moving. I couldn't tell what she thought of the silence, but judging from the way that she jumped when I spoke, I would say her thoughts were heading the same way mine were - somewhere distant, somewhere alone, and somewhere hard to ignore.

"So... where did you run off to yesterday?" I asked her slowly, my voice low. "What happened that I don't know about?"

Usually, I would have picked up on it all by now, but for once there didn't seem to be any rumours circulating about it. Alethea pulled a face, although I

clearly wasn't meant to see. I kept pace with her easily, slowing down as she did to stay beside her. She waited a few moments before she replied.

"Kenneth... Can we please not talk about it?" she asked nervously. "It's over and done with now - and things are cool. We don't need to go into it all."

"Alright," I allowed, although I was sure it was clear that I wished we'd do anything but.

Lucy

"So how's Charlie?"

I hated the way that some people would scold me for asking that. Some people thought that the very worst thing you could ever do was ask someone about something they'd been upset about before, and while I generally agreed with those thoughts there was nothing wrong with checking up. Sure, if they'd been crying about something irreversible - if someone close to them had died, for example - you wouldn't bring the subject back up, but if they were only worried I always thought you should. It meant that

she knew I hadn't just forgotten it, and that I wasn't just digging for information to spread around.

If things were better, that was great, and it stopped me worrying about it as well. If things were worse, well, I'd always believed that talking to someone made you feel better, as annoying as the habit may be.

"Doing good," she smiled. A different expression crossed her face for a moment. "Well - he'd alright. Still adjusting."

I nodded, watching her. She didn't look at me - too busy being typical Alethea and scribbling furiously in her book as she attempted to copy down what was on the board. "So what's got you all tense today?"

She stopped what she was doing for a moment.

When she glanced at me, there was something hidden in her eyes, and I knew instinctively that she wasn't telling me the whole story when she spoke. "It's just kind of strange, you know? I mean, he'd still my brother and all - he's still exactly the same as he was before, and I know that, but..."

She took a deep breath, setting her pencil down.

"Well - I know he's still the same, but it's hard not to be cautious. After all the fuss, it's just buzzing in my mind and every time I look at him it's there in the front of my mind. I'm going to be watching him for signs that anything's wrong now - and I don't know how to stop it. I mean, I don't want to pretend it didn't happen, that could make things even worse the next time, but I can't treat him like he'd a fragile figure all the time, either. I don't know what to think."

I was glad that she'd called me last night explaining it all. Who knew what would be running through my mind right now if I didn't know?

I thought about it for a bit. "Well - it's good to be cautious, isn't it? And when nothing happens for a while, it'll calm down. Sure, you'll be weary for a bit, but it isn't the end of the world. And besides, I know there's something else that's bugging you more. You know that whatever you're feeling at the moment will go away after a while, but there's something else too."

"I'm almost afraid for it to go," she admitted. "I don't want to get so slack that something goes wrong..."

"What could go wrong?" I asked. "I mean, obviously the whole blood thing could get muddled, but as long as he gets tested and eats right and all, it'll be fine, won't it?"

"Maybe..."

It was clear that she didn't want to talk about it. I was going to say something else, but she beat me to it.

"So where did you run to yesterday?" she asked, changing the subject.

Great - now we were on a subject I really didn't like. "Oh. I had to go say goodbye to my dad - he's leaving today, about one-ish I think..."

Almost saving me from the whole back story, but phone beeped it my pocket. I would have been relieved if it wasn't for the fact that out teacher had almost succeeded in quietening the rest of the class down and heard the tune. Oops. My face suddenly felt hot. I could've sworn it was on silent - I doubted if he'd accept that as an apology though.

So now I was faced with a dilemma - pretend it wasn't me and get in twice as much trouble afterwards, or just own up

Well, option one was out. Everyone was staring at me.

"Sorry, sir," I said, looking up apologetically as I dug my phone out of my bag. I didn't even bother to look at the screen - I knew who it was. Why was Mum calling me now? Did she really care so little about school that she'd do that? I had a particular tone set for her in case she ever called - which was rare in itself.

He still wasn't pleased. "Come and pick it up at the end of school, Lucy. Not before."

I pulled a face. Dad was going to text me just before his flight left.

Alethea was watching him with a worried expression as he walked away, dropping my phone pointedly into the top draw of his desk and slamming it shut. I glared for a moment - that was an expensive model.

"What's the matter?" I asked under my breath, returning my attention to the girl beside me.

"I left my phone at home," she admitted. It must have been clear on my face that I didn't see the problem, because she explained. "I'm meant to have it with me - and with everything going on with Charlie, I really don't want to miss a call."

"It'll be fine," I told her, confused by her worry. "Just nip in before you go out tonight. It saves you lugging your school stuff around as well - just drop it off at home."

She didn't like that idea. "I can't."

"Why not?"

She bit her lip, trying to think of an excuse.

We both looked up when the bell rang.

Alethea

Why, why, why, why, oh, why was I doing this?

Something was going to go wrong - very, superbly, amazingly wrong - I could almost sense it. I twitched

again, trying to deflect the uncomfortable feeling tingling inside of me.

No such luck.

I could still feel his eyes on me - watching wearily from behind me. The sapphire almost burnt. My fingers circled the chain around my neck awkwardly, feeling as the ruby above my heart shook erratically, completely in tune with my nerves.

I was being a total idiot, I knew, but I wasn't going to stop. I couldn't. It was so close that there was no point - and there was no proof that anything was going to happened. It could all be fine. It would be fine. I wouldn't stop. I wouldn't need to. I couldn't. I could. I should. I...

This wasn't going to work. It might, but it might all going wrong. It might fall apart. Someone might get hurt.

And that someone would be Charlie.

And that thought just made my stomach twist on ends. I had to stop. He was by my side in an instant, his arm around my waist, stabilising me. His other

hand on my arm, his thumb tracing light, soft patterns against my skin to clam me down.

"We'll just stop in. I'll drop my school stuff and grab my mobile, and then we'll go," I said for what must be the thousandth time in the past hour.

He nodded his head slightly, weary. "Yes, alright - that's fine."

I nodded, agreeing, but didn't make a move to go further. I thought I was shaking, but I couldn't be sure. Charlie wasn't even home. What was I worried about? If he wasn't there, what could go wrong?

But what if he got back before we'd left? Then what would happen? Mum had said they'd be going to the shops in the afternoon, but didn't say what time they'd be back. And my mum was notorious for her timing - she'd be bound to come in and check Charlie just before we got out of the house. I wasn't going to let that happen.

"Well, actually, why don't you stay here, and I'll run over, and-"

"There is no way I'm letting you out of my sight when you're like this," Kenneth said bluntly. "Will you relax? At least tell me what's wrong?"

I shook my head. "Everything's fine. Peachy. Perfect. Great."

His eyes were examining me again, searching for any clue as to what was wrong. I still hadn't told him about Charlie - he didn't need to know. Kenneth hated him anyway, so he wouldn't care. And if I did let it slip then he wouldn't realise that that was why I didn't want him at my house because I wasn't meant to understand that it would make any difference.

I should just tell him that Dad was being awkward again - surely that was an excuse he would swallow? I'd already tried that though, but the words just wouldn't come.

"Maybe you should just go home and rest," he suggested, being extremely cautious as he spoke. It was almost as if he expected me to go overboard if he said the wrong thing. That was probably wise.

"No - it's alright, I'll be fine," I repeated.

For some reason, I didn't think he believed me.

Kenneth

She didn't like being here. Or, more to the point, she didn't like me being here, I just wished I knew why. My eyes scanned the room. I hated having to wait in here - her lounge was such an uneventful room. And the room that I'd first seen an overwhelming fear settle on her features. I couldn't help but hate it.

Something was different today though. At first I wasn't sure what it was, but I soon worked it out. The cards on the mantel piece. The red ones with the pink, shining hearts and the blossoming flowers. I hadn't paid much attention to the date - February 14th - interesting...

I turned back when I heard Alethea enter the room. I really wished I didn't have to lie to her, at least about a bit of it. It was annoying to have to watch her struggling on the stairs when I could have her up and down them in a second.

"Alright," she breathed. "My school things are in my room, Diana's food's in her bowl, there's a note for

Dad because I know he'll panic otherwise - what with everything else going on..."

She looked frantic as she ticked the things off on her fingers.

"Ok, that's alright - so we can go," she said quickly, already turning for the door. A strip of black slithered in front of her and started curling around her legs. "Not now, Di," she said, pushing the creature away.

"Did you pick your phone up?" I asked. I'd thought that was the whole point of the trip back here. She froze for a moment.

"No," she groaned. "It's still upstairs."

"I'll get it," I volunteered, moving out of the room before she could protest. As soon as I was out of her sight, I sped up, eager to leave. She'd have to relax once we were away from here, right?

When I got back, her cat was still pawing fiercely at her leg.

"Stop it, Diana!" Alethea shouted.

I looked up to her, shocked.

Diana

I looked up at her, my milky eyes locking to hers. Something melted in her eyes just before I moved to turn away, and she bent down, scooping me up in her arms, just the way she used too. A moment before, I'd wanted to leave, but now I just snuggled into the embrace, missing it too much to push away.

"Di, oh, Di, I'm sorry," she whispered, burying her face in my fur. Her fingers caressed against it, sending familiar sensations through me. "I'm so sorry, Di..."

I purred in her arms, trying to tell her that is was alright.

Kenneth

I heard a car turning into the road outside, although I didn't stir. Diana heard it too - saw her ears twitch towards the sound - but her reaction was somewhat different. After a second, my senses roused.

I stopped breathing.

Alethea

"Diana!" I scolded, shocked as I dropped her, her claws piercing my skin. Well, I didn't so much drop her as she leapt down, but my arms loosened instantly.

I laughed a little when I looked at the scratches - it had been so long since she'd done that that it almost felt comforting to have something familiar going on. After a moment, the sound stopped as I realised what a ridiculous reaction it was. When I heard movement, something else clicked.

I looked up from the blood surging up through my skin to the frantic sapphire eyes watching it earnestly - their owner's thought already devoted to the feel of it against his lips.

Chapter 12

Blood Stained Ruby 12 (Start)

I am absolutely awful and I realise that, but I'm posting this to show that I am back to working on this! Thanks for sticking with me while I've had so much going on, I can't believe I left this for so long - I'll try not to let it happen again.

Enjoy!

JJ

---recap---

Kenneth

I stopped breathing.

Alethea

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A Desperation For Ignorance

Alethea

My eyes squeezed shut.

I heard a low, pained sound, although I couldn't work out where it came from. There was a slight, hesitant

movement beside me. I thought my body shied away from it but couldn't be sure. There must have been someone beside me because I felt them catch my hand with theirs and hold onto it.

My shoulders twisted, uncomfortable, lifting my back from the mattress I was on. It was hard - it didn't give at all and I could feel how sore my muscles were after having to be on it for so long. Exactly how long I didn't know, but when I became conscious of the whimper escaping my lips, I realised it must have been a while.

"Allie? You alright, hon?"

It took a long while for me to recognise what the words meant, and even longer to form a reply. My voice sounded raspy when I spoke.

"It hurts..."

"What hurts, sweetie? What's wrong?"

I didn't want to open my eyes, but something about the voice I heard compelled me to do so. When I did, I was instantly shocked by what I saw. At first, I couldn't see past the haze of white spreading across

my eyes, then shapes started to form, swinging towards me.

I whimpered, closing them tight again.

"Honey? Honey? Allie!"

Fighting as I did so, I forced my eyes open, hating the terror in his voice. He looked relieved when I did. I had to squint, but slowly more than his expression came into view. Although it seemed even slower, gradually, my vision stabilised too.

He smiled slightly, thankful. As if his previous panic had never existed, he sat back, relaxing, and said, "Hey, Al."

"Hey," I said slowly, dubiously, trying to sit up. I twisted my head around a little and looked to the wall behind me, recognising it somehow. "This is... This is..."

Charlie's room, my mind echoed quietly in the background. I couldn't quite get the words to my lips. I blinked when Dad tensed beside me and followed his gaze to the door, looking at the other person stood just outside the room.

There was a long time when no-one said anything. They both focused their attention on me, but I looked solely to the person in the doorway.

I blinked.

Kenneth had an odd look about him. It wasn't something hidden in his eyes as it usually was - although that was there too - it was something more. There was something just hidden beneath his expression that conveyed his tension without any outward signs. And it was a something that I most definitely didn't like.

When he stepped into the room, it felt like he was penetrating some invisible barrier - the struggle it seemed to cause him, though the signs weren't obvious, was huge. My dad tensed further, and his eyes flicked once back to me before he stood stiffly. Without taking his eyes off of Kenneth, he stepped in my direction, and at the last moment looked to me, bending down to press his lips against my forehead.

He stepped back without a word.

Slowly, his eyes staying on my father who was looking pointedly around the room, Kenneth stepped forward to take his place. He sat in the same seat, but it looked so different that I would hardly have believed it if I hadn't seen the transition.

"How do you feel?"

I tried to smile, ignoring the tone to his voice, but it turned quickly to a grimace - apparently my features didn't want to move that way. "I'm fine. It takes a lot to get me down."

Dad shot me a look - something between suspicion and a glare. As my full consciousness returned, so did the ability to bury the pain inside me, although that may just have been the medication. He didn't like that I was lying about it, mainly because he knew I'd keep it up now that I'd started.

Kenneth looked downwards and I felt my expression slip to a frown. I glanced at Dad, who - although reluctant - took the hint and left, muttering something about going to call Mum, and needing to be outside to do it.

When Kenneth still didn't say anything, I let my eyes flick around the room, hoping that the look in them was mildly curious as I intended it to be. I realised I was right, this had been Charlie's room. "You know, for someone who hates doctors as a general rule, I'm not doing too well at the moment."

My voice sounded weak and low - even I could barely distinguish one word from the next. It stung too, but I wasn't about to let that show. I looked back to Kenneth. Looking torn, he flung himself off of the chair and strode over to the window, looking out silently. The way his eyes flicked across the ground below was almost violent. He stayed there.

About the Author

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